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## Crossing the Land of Vocal Techniques Errors

That which comes easy flies away in one breath; it knows not how to fly freely.  
True learning presupposes suffering, failures, and exasperation.

**Keywords:** musical pedagogy, voice architecture, imitation, half-learned music teachers

### IMITATION AND ANALOGY

Imitation and analogy seem to come naturally to any human learning exploit. One first learns to do like others – mothers, fathers, teachers, kids in the school yard, etc. Or so we were taught to believe. Then we grow to get more of it, and grow bitter, more enlightened, perhaps, and to slowly realize that the great chain of imitation is endless; and also that the chain of analogy is soothing because of the sturdiness with which it crushes the differences from within which the world emerges and via which it keeps going. Difference frightens like freedom does. Analogies are necessary for both intellectual orientation and the assurance that there is a generic solidarity among all things worldly. Some analogies “stand to reason”, like the one between the sun and an orange – the two *relata* share shape and, maybe, color; others may be fresh, surprising, more complex: the hockey player skating backwards to join his team’s defense is analogous in more than one way to the subject respectfully and humbly taking leave from the Chinese emperor by walking backwards from the celestial master’s throne.

Any analogy is partial, but analogy as such is a total form that in principle may touch any object in the world, link it to another, to others, so as to not let them fall out of the world. In Judeo-Christian thinking, where the first man was created by divinity according to His likeness, the analogy of being (*analogia entis*, as Thomas Aquinas calls it) binds substantially every creature

to the Creator. Here, the difference, even diaphanous, takes no time to turn diabolical: for the Christian, the ideal life means the imitation of Christ. Only differences that are subject to analogy and imitation lead to virtue; differences that remain differences stay, in the Christian texts, contexts and pre-texts, devilish.

In both religious and eloquent secular periods, imitation and analogy go hand in hand in any learning process. Little children come out of infancy imitating the sounds, then the words, phrases and sentences spoken by parents; when they grow up a little, they begin to imitate the gestures, intonation, and wishes of other children, perhaps older ones. When the game becomes dominant, children learn its rules by imitating those who have played it for a longer time. The repeated telling of fairy tales strengthens their faith in imitation. Innovation, the creation of new games and stories, will be added to the dominance of imitation. But in both imitation and the taking leave of it, the seriousness of the child at play is without a pair in nature. Even if adults assume that learning in childhood and often beyond is based on analogies and initial imitations, we cannot fully penetrate the children's thinking. If it is employed for too long, analogy turns into a hindrance. So, it must be abandoned at some point, in order to make room for the knowing of differences, the infinitesimal differences between an event and another, between words, people, and, in our case, the manners of singing the same melody.

In pedagogical processes, the initial stage must be dominated by imitation and analogy: the student must be given the assurance that s/he is like his teacher, that vocal music is not an art brought by aliens, but a part of the world similar to many other parts – instrumental music, painting, ballet, acting, etc. The opposite of establishing this ground to be shared by both teacher and student is the authoritarian instruction, in which the teacher dresses up as the high priest of an unknown and terrifying divinity for the pupil. As the latter pedagogical style does not interest me here – because it is as alien to my own philosophy of pedagogy as are cubic apples and neckless giraffes – I will focus on the “normal” style, which establishes from the outset an analogous relationship between teacher and pupil. I believe in the value of common sense, in its ability to recognize normality without having to build, deconstruct, or accuse it. In my teaching, I tried to differentiate myself from most of my childhood and youth teachers, people who relegated common sense to the last place. Being a polemical individual, I taught my students that we share a common background: as I am an individual person, so must they be. Because I am not the Law, I try to teach them to become themselves. In this case, you will have noticed, the analogy and the imitation are mutually opposing:

I suggest to students not to imitate me, but to orient themselves towards their own capacities to finally build their own style.

We do not know where artistic inspiration comes from; we cannot predict when art will arise: art simply happens. This fatality of inspiration was called muse, or luck, or god, or Holy Spirit. In all these cases, the source of inspiration is external; it does not belong to a human inner side that generates art like, say, the sun generates rays. To create, therefore, we must be open to the inspiration, or the inflection, or the information coming from outside. An idea comes upon you, or a perfect phrase, that you can only feel in the act, that you do not think of beforehand, call it a plan and follow it by singing it. The voice follows that inspiration, although the interpreter does not know where it comes from. Inspiration is a gift. In learning, as in interpretation, there are areas of influence that we cannot control, but which are decisive. The teacher must leave the door open to the student to make him/her sensitive to such influences, even if those influences may end up contradicting the teacher. Is this a utopian position? Is this radical definition of democracy, utopian: “I disagree with what you say, but I would give my life for you to have the right to say it”?<sup>1</sup>

How far does democracy go in the pedagogical processes? And if it goes far indeed, what kind of democracy are we talking about? The teacher and the student are not equally equal, and often the democracy that the teacher allows for the students is temporary, apparent, perhaps instrumental, as a preparatory exercise for the growth of a democracy that will come later. As capitalism and democracy are mutually reinforcing, although they are opposed to each other, so is the teacher’s authoritarianism fed by the democratic relationship s/he allows their students to entertain; while the democratic relationship is fed by the authority the teacher exercises. To the question “How do we teach pupils what democracy is?”, the primary answer should be: “We do not teach them a quantitative democracy, where the majority accedes to power because it shares a lowest common denominator”. An excellent experiment, done by a Swedish professor in his freshman sociology large class, full of young pupils who were noisily requesting that their socialist beliefs be introduced into the pedagogical process, is the following: the teacher asked the students whether they wished the socialist model to be implemented in their class. “Yees!”,

<sup>1</sup> “I (wholly) disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it”, wrote Evelyn Beatrice Hall in 1906, following Voltaire’s “je déteste ce que vous écrivez, mais je donnerai ma vie pour que vous puissiez continuer à écrire”. See <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2015/06/01/defend-say/>, accessed on January 11th, 2019.

came the unanimous answer. “Very good, well”, he replied, “but know that each of you will receive not the note you deserve, but the average grade of the whole class.” After the first test, he took all the individual grades, made the average, and each student received a 75%. The same procedure gave an average of 57% for the second test. The third test was failed by each and all. “Do you see how socialism works as quantitative democracy? In the end, each of you will end up leaning on others, no one will learn as they should, and everyone will lose.”<sup>2</sup>

This example shows that quantitative democracy leads to a pedagogical disaster. In the case of canto teaching, where the educational process consists of a one – one relationship between teacher and student –, such a democracy would be absurd. Yet, the question of a democracy understood in a superior way continues to be asked. This would consist of these questions that the teacher should ask: “When will I allow, or when will I suggest that students turn against me, even against what I teach them? When will I have the power to urge them to follow that inspiration that does not belong to me, and in which, perhaps, I do not even believe? When will I find the inner freedom to encourage them to go beyond me? If these things occur, if the students realize that the teacher makes such a sacrifice for the students to turn against the teacher, in order not to turn against themselves, then the democratic relationship, always grounded in effort, tension, and discomfort, will help the students grow faster and more harmoniously. And perhaps, one day, discover that the outside area that inspired them was the very democratic relationship with their teacher; that it was not a muse or a priest that lead their voice, their mind, or their body, but precisely that space full of tension between them and their teacher made that inspiration possible; that the source of inspiration is not transcendent, but rather immanent.

The true teacher helps the student relax, trust the teacher, trust her/himself, and, in the process, learn to become a teacher to her/himself and continue to “argue” with the teacher that s/he has now become. This “inner teacher” is not the imitation of the real teacher, but her/his analogue.

### **DANGEROUS ERRORS IN VOCAL TECHNIQUE**

As a means of primary orientation, here is the “list of the ten commandments” of the correct voice interpretation, or

<sup>2</sup> This, possibly apocryphal, anecdote is variously attributed to university professors from Sweden and Texas. See Mitchell 2011.

*The Decalogue*

1. Sing purely, simply, naturally!
2. Do not sing too hard!
3. Do not sing too much!
4. Do not sing too high!
5. Do not be afraid of mistakes!
6. Do not mimic another's voice color!
7. Do not force yourself to be original!
8. Do not force any part of your body to behave unnaturally!
9. Do not lose your patience!
10. Do not harbor the illusion that you can change the world for more than one moment!

The audio information the generation of young singers may acquire today from the internet is, at first glance, a huge help, which previous generations did not enjoy: neither the generation of the CD nor that of the tape recorder nor that of the vinyl disk. Yet this explosion of sound information is not devoid of traps. Contamination with false models of "perfect sounding" poses certain risks. The sound ideal, aspired to by many young singers, has its origins here, and if the way we relate to this ideal is not correct, most unpleasant, sometimes dire consequences may occur.

The first traps I, for one, have fallen victim to were the color and the mass/volume of the voice of remarkable singers I have come to admire by listening to and rehearsing a number of their famous recordings in an attempt to penetrate the secret of their outcome. Thirsting after knowledge, generally impatient but particularly vulnerable, the student is tempted to imitate what s/he hears. The effort to imitate, if sustained, will no longer allow the student to distinguish between a good imitation and a malignant one. In the focused process of imitation, the student gets bad habits, gets used to the wrong techniques (singing too hard, too much, or too high), and perhaps comes to think that they will give him access to a "sufficient imitation". The goal of the student, of course, is not to sing as Plácido Domingo, but to sing, for example, *Lunge da lei* from *Traviata* as Plácido Domingo does. The losses that the student will incur while trying to sing such are significant.

For the beginner, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to select the right sound information from the "stock" received through an electronic device, and to also understand the cause of a "correct" interpretation. To imitate Domingo's glorious interpretations will not do. For about a century, since the emergence of recording technologies, we have known that, no matter how efficient the

recording, the complexity of the sound information lacks the “live” dimension. Great art appears to essentially carry elements which may not be recorded. In our case, Domingo’s live interpretation cannot be replicated identically in any sort of recording. In such cases, recordings are double in nature, what one hears in a recording also points to what is missing: the interpretation’s overwhelming height, its intimacy which cannot be duplicated. At the risk of looking *vieux jeu*, I will say that a record is meant for recognition (say, Domingo’s, as opposed to Pavarotti’s voice), rather than true, practical cognition (how the pupil, as opposed to Domingo, sings). The pupil needs, at least in a first step, the honesty of the unaltered example of acoustic mediators in order to be able to properly judge the dimensions of a true interpretation. Here I do not take into consideration the contemporary phenomena related to electronic music, in which the mash, which brings together any musical genre or piece to process it electronically, becomes dominant; I am referring to the opera interpreter, whose voice quality must not be adapted to technological gimmicks or requirements, regardless of how posh these might be.

Were I to put the multitude of audio information that the internet offers us and submits us to under a magnifying glass, thus highlighting the potential danger it poses, it would be correct not to miss out on the benefits the young generation gets today thanks to technological progress. Like any progress, this one leaves parts of the past in the shadow. Among other parts, I dare say that it relativizes, or even minimizes the role of the ear of the other. The internet is the agent, rather the patient, after all.

Yet, the ear of the other – at first, that of the teacher, later, that of people we trust – is necessary to us throughout our professional activity. Almost all the singers, especially the great ones, confess to this. I say “almost all”, although I cannot give examples of singers who would consider the outer ear useless – for my claim is based on personal observations that have no counterpart in official statistics. As are Fleming’s musings:

The frustrating thing is that while I’m perfectly capable of making a decision by myself on most subjects, I can’t remove my ears from my body and place them in the back of the room for a vocal check. What we hear while we’re singing just isn’t true, so we are always dependent on someone we trust to take the role of our “outside ears”. (Fleming 2004: 202)

If you lack “the other ear”, say, that of your adviser, the electronic means are those that can bring most of the answers you need with respect to the quali-

ties and defects of your performance. Eventually, there should be no harsher critic of your performance than yourself, and this conviction should suffice to enforce the habit of recording of your musical rehearsals, a habit that would better become as usual as brushing your teeth. You can learn a great deal from this exercise; and you do not need a flawless recording to be able to perform a serious self-analysis. The essential elements can easily be distinguished via the practice of listening your own recordings, for whatever imperfections are there, they “jump in the ears”. So, to avoid self-criticism, you are tempted to sing hard (with force) to cover whatever imperfections you may notice in the recording. Yet, singing hard cannot hide behind the “phonogeneity” of the voice, no matter how spectacular may this be. Very often, though, our objective critique of our own mistakes takes the back seat, because of our instantaneously emotional response. However, this does not affect the lack of decency with which technology throws the truth in our face. That truth is almost always easier to digest than the laudatory expression of the good intentions of others. For the time being (and, perhaps, since times immemorial), we have been – and are waiting, as if anaesthetized, the times when the immaculate white of team spirit will dominate the atmosphere of the tight but narcissistic lyrical scenes. That would cross out the need for self-analysis, indeed; but that is a utopia.

Regarding interpretative operative methods, opinions contradict – at least when it comes to the intrusion, in the *bel canto* school, of concepts that have led in time to the emergence of new “singing methods”; these methods are due to the followers of various “embellishments” of the unique style of *bel canto* – “singing as one speaks” (*si canta come si parla*). Today we can talk about a singing school in the past tense only. Contemporary – competing – currents have gained so much ground that they have become, over the past decades, methods in themselves.

These current methods, which are struggling for supremacy, end up by muting, instead of helping each other. The complementarity of *bel canto*'s mid-19th century methods, which led to an admirable consensus, is no longer in vogue. Now is the time of competition, and the focus on competition makes “methodologists” oppose other candidates, perhaps well-known ones, thus forgetting the beautiful tradition of *bel canto*. Is not war the active forgetting of past peace? It's a typical case of change for the sake of change, I would say if I did not know that, here, the love for music has been replaced by sheer narcissism.

To avoid speaking for too long in the first person, let me switch and invoke Sergiu Celibidache's famed statement: an infinite series of *no*'s seems



to be more meaningful than an avalanche of *yes*'s. So, by avoiding the dictatorship of accolades, the *yes*'s can now contradict each other. Each method removed from the classic *bel canto* is today in a state of galloping self-assertion, so much so that today's world of opera abounds in *yes*'s which do not rhyme with one another. The cacophony of *yes*'s that rhetorically acknowledge the alleged perfection of this or that performance, and thus avoid any relevant criticism, amounts to little more than nothing.

"Perfection does not attract attention", the Romanian poet Nichita Stănescu used to say. Pavarotti voiced the same opinion, at least during the meetings I had with him. Pavarotti had no interests in a performance's perfection; he was taken, instead, with its authenticity. For him, the most important quality of a voice was not its beauty, but the imprint, which could be recognized from the first sounds.

The ideal of vocal beauty held by most young singers is closely related to the amount of sound information they have stored over the years. It is this – chaotic, or at least disorderly – pile of information that is first responsible for the technical misguidance that the young will commit to in their attempts to get closer to their ideal of beauty. This is to also say that the informational avalanche that the internet delivers may well threaten "suffocate" the young interpreters who do not submit to the mastery of a teacher.

On the teacher's side, the "secrets" of the vocal technique are more often than not very difficult, if not impossible to translate into words. The teachers use various terms to explain the sensations they experiment when they sing. The teacher's subjectivity when attempting to translate these sensations often hinders the process of transmitting the doctrine. But, in fact, the peculiarity of transmitting competence from one instance to the other resides in the subjectivity of translating the sensations underlying the vocal technique.

In the first weeks and months of study, the pupil becomes familiar with the teacher's own language. Each teacher will allegedly explain the vocal technique using different language – and that because of the sensations that each singer decodes differently according to her or his own sensitivity. Wherefrom comes the difficulty of theorizing this phenomenon.

Along the years, I came to think that the sensations experienced by the student when they start to understand are very similar to what s/he experiences when remembering something. A "something" to which, having been hidden by oblivion, they no longer have access and to which, "suddenly", access is available again. Most of the time, it is not enough for the student to truly understand what is going on. S/he will need many other moments

of grace, as bright as those of remembrance, which will pile up in years until their memory will be able to recognize beneficial sensations without being in danger of forgetting them. So far, so good, yet nothing new: on the contrary, the relationship between remembrance and understanding is as old as Plato,<sup>3</sup> who claimed that any piece of knowledge was the recognition, or remembrance of the contents their disembodied soul had contemplated in the world of pure ideas. Plato calls the teacher who steers the pupil in the process of remembrance, *maieutes* (midwife), as he (Socrates, in Plato's case) helps others bring to light the truth which, unknowingly, they have had within them since the very beginning.

Once started, the process of knowledge as recognition will occur throughout one's professional activity. From this standpoint, memory is understood not only as "software" for storing information but, above all, as a source of knowledge. In other words, memorizing does not create a passive information storage that is quietly waiting to be accessed, but rather as a dynamic principle that generates knowledge – and this in a sense that stands in need of clarification.

Simplifying, we speak of two kinds of knowledge: "to know that" and "to know how". For example, I know *that* World War II ended on May 9th, 1945 in Europe, but I know *how* to speak German. The first kind of knowledge refers to the stock of memorized information; the second, to practical capabilities. However, language can be tricky: if I say "I know that I exist", the conjunction "that" does not refer to passive mnemonic content. In this case, the ambiguity of the conjunction and thus of the whole expression must be eliminated from the very beginning. On the other hand, practical knowledge, or "know how", is active, performative, and, potentially, creative. The performative knowledge of "know how" employs past experiences that have accumulated and have become more or less automated in repetitive activities such as speaking a foreign language. These experiences are reactivated in every new performance, whether we know it or not, whether we do it more or less automatically.

Performance is grounded in two components: repetition and patience. In other words, any "know how" polishes itself over time, by reducing the instances of "I do not know to" or "I'm not sure I know how to". This process is not a linear one, though. Quite on the contrary, like any complex "trial and error" activity, it knows joyful ups and frustrating downs, blockages,

<sup>3</sup> Plato discusses the theory of learning as remembrance, or anamnesis, especially in *Meno* (70a, ff.) and *Phaido* (74a-c).

moments of lateral drifting, of loss of hope, and of regaining of local mastery and self-confidence. I know from my interpretive and didactic experience that mistakes, which often strand the singer on islands of ignorance or semidoc-tism, are essential to achieving a high level of practical knowledge.

As singing is not a primarily intellectual activity, but rather a sensu-ous one, it is so very hard to transmit in writing even the smallest piece of musical wisdom. Yet, one should not fall into despair when confronting such difficulties; instead, one should try to suggest instances of such wis-dom, rather than attempt to transmit it directly. What would be more fool-ish than to set up a competition between discursive writing and the music it tries to “explain”. Writing, or more generically speaking, the discursive activity which addresses the intellect, fails when trying to translate into words the musically irreducible – if we only remembered how awkward the hermeneutic part of a musical chronicle is, for example. How many sloppy metaphors, how many comparisons that fall flat, how many epithets stuffed with hyperbolae figure in such texts!

As for the words used by the teacher to “teach” their pupils, how many of them are not like those metaphors and comparisons and epithets? How to translate music into language and language into music? This is an age-old question, to which the most decent answer I can think of would be: to refine language to the level of suggestion, then to that of a rich silence, and then to even make the speaker vanish in the face of music. Such music will be thus better understood, known, and performed.

The task of the intellect in vocal technique lies in the recognition and memorization of sensations, through repetitions that ultimately lead to habit. If intuition is superior to intellect, then one of our major and constant concerns should be the translation of intuition into the language of con-sciousness. We sing intuitively and translate sensations into the language of consciousness with the help of metaphors or abstractions. The abstract think-ing, so necessary to the singer, goes beyond the physical references, and seeks to understand additional messages and interpretations. At the same time, abstract thinking connects sensory experiences with the conceptualization of emotions, having the ability to organize, interpret and synthesize the evi-dence provided by perception.

In the transmission of information from one instance to the other dur-ing the pedagogical process, the working tools will be the demonstration, intuition, abstraction, and, of course, the sensorial. Their practice as a way of mastering “craftsmanship” becomes vital to the vocalist, especially since the material relationship that the instrumentalist (e.g. the violinist) has with

her/his instrument (e.g. the violin) is not given to the singer, a fact that also deprives the latter of the ability to hear the instrument in real time from outside of the resonance box. Acoustic perception during execution is therefore fundamentally different from that of the instrumentalist. This perception, understood as such by the interpreter, enters the circuit of remembrance and recognition.

The process of recognizing and memorizing sensations, in all its complexity, which is the basis of all singing schools, is carried out, in a first stage, under pedagogical guidance. The end of the whole process is the autonomy of the student, who, helped in the right way, eventually becomes his/her own master. As Virginia Zeani says,

If I were to find a common feature for all the great performers you talked about so far, it would be that they created their own technique, style, and voice in the end. If this is the case, I would ask: how important is the teacher? . . . The teacher is essential because s/he helps you understand the secrets of singing and teaches you patience and introspection. But, understandably, the student understands her/himself. . . . Teachers go. But you must always study. So, the longest companion of your study is you yourself. (Zeani and Voinescu 2011: 187)

The maturation of voice is a natural process, and as one cannot reset the pace of organic transformations during puberty through education, so one can neither accelerate nor slow down the process of the maturation of the voice with the aid of vocal technique. But that does not mean that this process may not be hindered or even damaged beyond repair. Interfering with the natural transformations of the voice is an intrusion as damaging as any game of “toying with nature”. A faulty vocal technique does not slow down the pace of natural transformation, but it replaces it with its own bad habits, thus diverting the meaning of the voice’s becoming. We thus come to understand that it is not the voice that can be educated, but the singer only.

### **UNDERSTANDING THE “ARCHITECTURE” OF THE VOICE**

The level of vocal performance is closely related to the preservation of a youthful voice. In this respect, one must say that there are many factors that bring the thoughts relating these two to the surface. “Meeting” questions with answers is one of the factors. The quality of the thought that is born is not always the consequence of the answer; it can often be the result of the

way the question was formulated. There are not just wrong answers; there are also questions that, unwisely, will early or late lead to mistakes. Inexperienced young people may waste precious time focusing on answering erroneous questions, until they stumble upon the correct answer: that the questions themselves were irrelevant or foolish. In hindsight, these youths will have realized the loss they have suffered along their wanderings. The role of the teacher, in this case, is to lead the students from the very beginning on the path of relevant questions. I think that everyone must learn to live with their own mistakes, and to do so fearlessly. One must go through the mistake, exhaust it, and making it run its course, overcome it. Although, as Oscar Wilde put it, one can refrain from anything, except for temptation, fear does not listen to us all too often. Here's what Renée Fleming said:

*No! I cannot do this!* Stage fright makes you feel as if you will die if you go out on the stage. In such a situation, the positive effect of an excellent therapist cannot be underestimated. . . . Even though there was no role I had sung more often than the Countess, it never stopped being a challenge, with *Dove sono* still inspiring nothing but nerves. I could feel myself moving back into the tunnel. On opening night, just before the curtain went up on act 2, I was backstage waiting to go on and started wondering if there was some graceful way I could slip out of the theater without anyone's noticing. (Fleming 2004: 335-337)

The fear of error is, however, different from what the great Fleming invokes; for the fear before the show seems to envelop the whole universe, while the fear of mistake is felt in precise places – in the throat, in the heart, or perhaps in the trembling knees, in the hands suddenly become lead-heavy, or in the entrails that seem aerial. Sometimes a feeling of slackness encompasses your entire body; some other times you feel that time stops and blocks your going forward, as if you hit a wall.

Some other times you just want to disappear:

So many nervous singers long to fall through nonexistent stage holes that I have to wonder why recital halls across the world don't just go ahead and saw them into the floor-boards. *Ach, ich fühl's* is a very exposed aria, sung for the most part very quietly. That's always been the thing that frightens me the most: anything that's exposed. Not the fireworks, fioriture, leaps, trills, or chest tones –

those I can file my nails by. The terrifying place is that soft pitch in the middle voice. That drenches me in cold sweat. This was one of the first pieces I'd sung with this kind of exposure, so you have to wonder what I was thinking of when I chose it for such an important audition. My throat tightened completely. My breath stopped working, and I had a flutter in my sound that you could drive a truck through. I can still see my family's faces fall, and everyone in the house just sitting there with a look of growing embarrassment. Richard Bado told me later that he wanted to stand up in the middle of the audition and say, "We're going to stop now. She can do so much better than this, and I think we should just try again another year". When it was finally over, after what felt like twenty years of standing there with my throat in a vise grip, I had my first real existential crisis. (Fleming 2004: 124-125)

Perhaps, once fear is recognized, new ways open to the interpreter. For example, the inability felt, at times, by the singer when certain sounds are emitted may be redeeming. The body defends itself against wrong thoughts or reflexes. If the body allows sounds to be emitted with the wrong thought, the voice suffers. Over time, this "availability" leads to the premature wear of the voice, and the singer's artistic life is cut short. But understanding your own mistakes, especially understanding fear as a mistake, helps the artist to free her/himself. Trying to sneak out of the labyrinths of fear, in my artistic activity I came to discover, after a long time, that the exit can never be found by avoiding fear. On the contrary, the exit from the maze is through the door of fear, the forbidden door, which, when pushed, becomes liquid and lets you pass on the side of freedom. On the other bank you will have to dry up, dry your tears, to be presentable to others and yourself. But then you will know that the big step has been made.

Going through the doors of fear, I often looked at the steps taken before. The ambiguity of the adverb "before" no longer blocks me from the perspective of the new stage in which I am; and even encourages me to see that the temporal meaning of the word ("before" as opposed to "after") came to become the origin of the spatial sense ("before" as opposed to "behind"). What had happened to me before, the past mistakes, the liquefied doors were the starting points of my progress, of "my walking forward". This coherent image that turns the labyrinth into a royal way toward a new and higher stage of my artistic life must not be considered in itself. As such, it can be a boring and hasty self-restoration, a self-confirmation of my "justification". If this image

loses its freshness, the character of revelation it had when it first appeared to me can easily be transformed into a dogma. And dogmas are severe drugs. While repeating, perhaps while humming the dogma “so I freed myself”, as if the future were a series of echoes of a convenient past, that very precious image could throw me into another labyrinth: that of the rigid certainties, of the unchecked beliefs that could propel me into the other country of errors, where the ego is king, general, teacher, and singer.

Trying to preserve the freshness of the image of my release, I came to wonder whether all my journey until then had been a discovery or a construction. If my artistic life and, to some extent, its pedagogical side is dominated by a step-by-step construction (and its step-by-step retrospective reconstruction), or a fulminating discovery, a lighting coming out on the stage to receive, as applause, a thunderous *Eureka!* To clarify this distinction, I will present some of the technical aspects of the problem.

Understanding the “architecture” of the voice lies in discovering its peculiarities. Today, forcing things a little, I can say that the voice is sufficient to itself, that its “intelligence” is adequate. *Es singt*, says the German singing school. In understanding this *es singt*, the voice builds on itself. Understanding this process, with the help of the intuition translated into consciousness, leads to the contemplation of a living construction that is in constant motion. When one translates an intuition into “consciousness” (Immanuel Kant would call it “concept”, or *Begriff*), one represents (*vorstellen*) the intuition through the concepts of reason. The translation of intuition into the language of consciousness is limited, primarily by the latter’s rational character. Of course, every translation is a betrayal, but if one retains some of the freshness of the intuition when translating it into the concepts of reason, not everything is lost: representation through concepts does not necessarily destroy the quality of the intuition. It transforms it, but if it manages to keep its radius of freshness, rather than breaking it by the work of abstraction, or finding in it fuel for conceptual thinking only, then that ray will continue to enlighten, inspire and bind thought to corporeality as a bright memory.

When the canto school uses only the concept of construction as a pedagogical method, it leaves little room for the manifestation of intuition. The solid construction of a voice requires intuition, just as the bricks need the mortar to form a lasting wall. The mortar nourishes the construction. Intuition is food for consciousness and, at the same time, for the immune system of the voice. The deregulation of this immune system can lead to the collapse of the “edifice”. So, the “architecture” of the voice, no matter the stage you are at, is a reality to be understood and assumed. But this architecture lies beyond our

will. The road to a fair vocal technique begins by discovering, understanding, and assuming this already existing “architecture” of the voice.

Most of the time when we set out to complete a certain construction, we already have in mind the form we would like to have. In the case of the construction of a voice, things occur in a similar manner: you often have an ideal vocal color, of sonorous “penetration”, or even vocal category to tackle certain roles. At the end of such a road (if you can associate such a search with one end . . .) the probability of getting closer to the ideal is great, but the result will be a more or less successful copy of the original. In such cases, you run the risk of never finding out who you really are. If you discard the discoveries you make during the construction of the voice, the understanding and internalization of the voice architecture will turn out to be impossible. Believing that you know the color of your voice when you are at the beginning of the road can be a sign of a remarkable intuition, or tenderness naïveté resulting from the lack of experience or misguidance.

As long as the instinct is the only point of support, the voice will manifest itself naturally; but to achieve the vocal performance necessary to approach the classic repertoire, the instinct alone is not enough; it must be nourished by knowledge.

The discovery and construction are only apparent results: they are, in fact, synergistic processes, in which “to build” and “to discover” may intersect, mutually motivate, and combine. A construction can be discovered and obviously a discovery can be built. Therefore, what I propose is to build your voice as you discover it, for its discovery can lead to the elevation of its construction. For me, this is the “logic” of nature, which intuition translates into the language of consciousness without irreparable losses.

## **THE EGO**

As we are singing for the others, we also are teaching others – we are professionals. The intensity of ego can be detrimental to both interpretive and pedagogical arts. But the consequences of the two *ego*-isms are different.

The last thirty years of searches have also shown me the limits a teacher has to assume. The fact that a teacher cannot reveal to anyone the craft does not denote incompetence, but shows a simple truth. And simple truths are clearer by their implacable cruelty. One of the manifestations of incompatibility lies in ignoring this truth. It takes at least two subjects to talk about a transfer of competence. But when, repeatedly, this transfer fails, taking into account the experience of the subjects, it is up to the teacher to assume the impossibility of making this transfer. And, yes, to advise the pupil to find



another master. Of course, the decision to get her/himself out of the equation calls for the teacher's strength; but I think this is one of the first and, at the same time, among the most important "exams" that have to be passed if we want to dedicate ourselves to the pedagogical field. The topic is a delicate one: how do you make sure that the student does not feel abandoned by you? That s/he may want to continue the training with another teacher? That s/he may become resentful because you did not care enough, which would close her/him the door to her/his potential lyrical career? All this is judged on a case-by-case basis; and it must be done in a delicate and open manner, explaining to the student as clearly as possible that the intention of the teacher was not to hurt the student, but that, on the contrary, the separation of the young wo/man from her/his current teacher is, in fact, a beneficial solution.

If we compare the student's ego with that of the teacher, we cannot fail to see that the former is less malignant than the latter. If the teacher does not release her/himself from this selfish attitude, the continual, blunt affirmation of her/his own "law", the will to subject the pupil, then s/he will not try to understand the mechanism by which the pupil can be helped to become independent.

The question of the ego must not, however, be treated dogmatically: it is not enough to say that the ego of the teacher (and, incidentally, that of the student) is bad. Let us think of cases where the teacher's charisma fascinates the students, motivates and moves them, makes them burn the steps and make mistakes. Even if, presumably, there is no firm pedagogical link between the two, the student's fascination may open lines of communication both external (student-teacher) and internal (student-student), which could have been hardly foreseeable in advance. Charisma and fascination without discipline and intense work can lead to considerable failures and can make but beautiful losers out of the students. To avoid such failures, the teacher has to control the range of influence of her/his own charisma on her/his young students. Excessive and aggressive charisma turns out to mount the teacher's ego-driven performance in front of the student. In such cases, the pedagogical effect is disastrous. In my youth, I was given to such masters, who preferred to give me shows of their own talent, histrionics and, finally, of their devouring ego; knowledge, however, they gave me very little and even less help. They insisted, however, perversely, that I would never be able to reach their level. The paradox of this educational style made my addiction to them grow. But the bitter taste of these experiences induced in me everything but freedom. Keeping these in mind, I have been making the effort to fashion my pedagogical method and experience as far away from their style as possible.

Thus released from these dangers, in my pedagogic activity I invite students to relax, not to be afraid of making mistakes, to retake, ironically, a theme that did not go out well at first, to play with a melodic line, and even to pamper themselves a little bit, in all, to fool around. I suspect that they will do it at home when they are alone, as a right way of creating an intimate relationship with their own voice and body. Above all, they will enact such acts of intimacy in order to try to come out from the judging power which the teacher – that’s me – must exercise permanently, and that not just to encourage them. I encourage my students from the very beginning not to look for the perfect singing, but for the correct singing (in the beginning, the two are separate, even disjunctive). I do it with a certain precision, but without imposing my authority. Students will quickly discover what this difference is and how “perfect singing” is a chimera able to choke the vocal cords from the very beginning.

Finally, in order to present in more detail the “anatomy” of the ego, I must say that the feeling of one’s own superiority very often lies with the teacher. Like any demon who knows how to hide in the details and how to change his appearance at a puzzling speed, the ego returns to various moments of learning to distort it, interrupt it, and, sometimes, to put an end to it. How can the teacher defend her/his pride bouts, which can strike, with an increasingly subtle intensity, during her/his pedagogical activity? By ignoring them? By passing them over? I am amused by myself when I become aware of the pride’s hydra heads sticking out (or a moment later, but not too late). And I move on, so I do not feel in danger of becoming famous in the study hall. This is one, only one of the lessons that our pupils give us; and I resist being a worse student than my students.

### **SKILLS AND BAD HABITS**

In order to be able to teach someone how to hammer a nail without bending it, you, the guide, must first be able to do it. Your performance is due to your practice and talent. I dare to extrapolate the example to all pedagogical activities where the skill of the one who assumes the role of a teacher is absolutely necessary. Teaching is, naturally, different from our private practice in our workshop, where no one sees nor hears us, and there is no one to judge us, where, sheltered from the pressure of possible public failures, we can smack our fingers while hammering a nail.

Of those who are able to stick the nail without bending it, only some manage to pass on their craft to others. It would be wiser, therefore, when the practice is lacking, to keep away from the temptation that urges us to

believe that we are part of an elite, that our pedagogical talents and intuitions are so developed that our professional becoming was given to us at birth, and that, therefore, any kind of practice would be futile. As long as practice presses hard questions on us, while revealing the limitations of pure theorizing, I find it hard to believe that one can teach *bel canto* without having interpreted it on stage.

Theories and theorists resulting exclusively from this lack of experience are doomed to be pedagogical failures; despite their real or fictitious efforts, they can never overcome their own condition: that of being empty authorities that emit portentous opinions based on nothing. The half-learned appears as such only in relations with others. There, s/he uses the little s/he knows to mask her/his own ignorance. When knowledge is used as a wall against one's own ignorance, then a psychodrama ensues, in which the half-learned's lead to sometimes chaotic, sometimes sad, but always ridiculous effects. When the half-learned belongs to a (professional, social, etc.) hierarchy, s/he will be the first to fall under Murphy's Law: "In any hierarchy, each individual rises to the level of his own incompetence and remains there". Murphy's Law can be specified in this case such: "By ignoring what is above her/himself, the half-learned displays the perfect knowledge of what lies under him". A corollary both more particular and relevant here is: "When the half-learned is a *canto* teacher, the student's vocal cords get knotted".

To be a good teacher, it is absolutely necessary to have many and profound experiences. But you don't need to have had a great career . . . It's all about knowing the deep mechanism of the voice. As a rule, you know it only if you're a singer. You do not have to be a great singer. But you have to sing, so you know how to sing. I cannot imagine a violin teacher who does not know how to play the violin. (Zeani and Voinescu 2011: 236)

The famous soprano Lisa Della Casa, a sturdy smoker, asked by a columnist if smoking does not damage her wonderful voice, drew the attention, with a humor the reader will notice on the spot, on the fact that the most damaging act for a voice is not smoking, but singing. Sure, wrong singing, explains Della Casa, is more damaging to the voice than smoking. Indeed, could a Swiss soprano be wrong?

The more the language of skill transmission is polished with metaphors, the more open remains the door of imposture. And, of course, the less wounded you were in practice, the less doubts you have. By ricochet

your “competence” becomes, is, and seems to be – inexplicable. And why would it not be inexplicable, since all aspirants work, like sycophants, with an invisible instrument? Where does arrogance come from (a question not even rhetorical, because the one who asks rhetorical questions does not like to be interrupted), where does the feeling that only some (I, for one) can see it clearly? The answer could be this: because those who see it have learned, after much fumbling, that painstaking practice can give you, at the end of thunder, the light of an unseen dimension; whereas semidoctrism is “the tunnel at the end of the light”.

English version by Călin-Andrei Mihăilescu

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