

# A Critique of Fundamentalism in Singing: Musical Authenticity, Authority, and Practice

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Perhaps the most hallowed of traditions among artists of creative vigour is this: traditions in the creative arts are per se suspect. For they exist on the patrimony of standardization, which means degeneration. They dominate because they are to the interest of some group that has the power to perpetuate them, and they cease to dominate when some equally powerful group undertakes to bend them to a new pattern. It is not difficult for the alert student to acquire the traditional techniques. Under the pressures of study these are unconsciously and all too easily absorbed. The extent to which an individual can resist being blindly led by tradition is a good measure of his vitality. (Partch, 1974, p. xv)

Much of the debate in contemporary music philosophy can be characterized as a continuing and dialectical argument between those who believe that the western musical canon represents the best that has been thought and known musically (Lipman, 1990, p. 429), versus poststructuralist critics who contend that such thinking is narrow, authoritarian, and even pernicious in its effects (Case-ment, 1993). This anachronistic and received *canon of genius*, these critics contend, is based on a conception of musical progress known as techno-essentialism according to which a higher premium is placed on technique than on stylistic evolution and personal expression, and musical value judgements made with reference to abstract, objective, and measurable standards of technical progress "which may not be germane to an artwork's cultural significance" (Williams, 1993, p. 37). The trouble with this conception of the western canon, so the argument goes, is that it is elitist and undemocratic in that it affords privileged status to musical experts possessing superior technical, musical, or historical knowledge while marginalizing other composers, performers and enthusiasts lacking sufficient knowledge or skill, or whose musical interests lie outside the canon (e.g., popular, rock, rap music etc.). Accusing musical experts and scholars from the classical tradition of indulging in compositional and performance fundamentalism, what the more enlightened of these critics wish to see is an approach to music in the school and university that is more humane, inclusive, open-ended, flexible, and progressive with respect to the compositions that are studied but also how those works are to be taught and performed.<sup>1</sup>

But while many music educators today probably understand what is meant by compositional fundamentalism, and would concede that the western canon needs to be made more humane and inclusive with respect to what music gets

performed, less clear is how the charge of fundamentalism applies to vocal and choral teaching and performance practice. In this paper, the problem of fundamentalism in singing and vocal and choral instruction is explored with reference to the concepts of musical authenticity, authority, and practice. As will be explained, when applied to vocal and choral music education, the charge of fundamentalism implies more than just fidelity to the composer's interpretive intentions or attempts to instill in students reverence for the works of the great masters and how they ought to be performed. It also connotes fidelity to certain prescribed forms of educational or pedagogical knowledge that "shape and define [the] discipline's self-view of what is standard, acceptable, and even desirable" (Citron, 1993, p. 19). Pedagogy and methodology, too, may be received or "canonized" knowledge, meaning that they have been handed down from teacher to teacher without being subjected to critical examination. When held up as definitive and normative, this *disciplinary* knowledge can stifle the development of alternate and potentially more valuable technical and musical means, not to mention the imaginations of those receiving that information, including, most importantly, our students.

### Defining Musical Authenticity

According to musicologist Joseph Kerman (1983), implicit in the very idea of a musical canon are canonical performances of those works or attempts to recreate composers' performance intentions faithfully or authentically. Coincident with the tendency to canonize certain musical compositions is a corollary belief that it is necessary to perform them in certain prescribed ways. This process of musical canonization serves several social functions, the most important of which is the construction of a frame of reference or a set of parameters for musical thought and action within a community. Once established, and because it is a projection of communal musical tastes and values, a musical canon plays a role in defining self and group identity relative to others (Citron, 1993, p. 19)<sup>2</sup>. Of course, it can also be used to exclude those whose interests lie outside the canon, who perform it in "bad taste," or are deemed incompetent (Parakilas, 1995, p. 13).

Leaving aside for the moment the issue of exclusivity, the problem with musical canonization is that, while necessary to musical thought and action, it is by definition conservative and normative in nature. It works to preserve musical culture and the status quo from the vicissitudes of change. When uncritically applied to teaching and performance practice, canonical musical knowledge can stifle musical creativity and imagination by needlessly restricting the range of musical choices available to conductors, performers, teachers, and students alike. If convinced that the goal is only to recreate, or closely approximate, the composer's original compositional and performance intentions, they may fail to develop and consider other, potentially more valuable or interesting, interpretive possibilities.

Musicologist James Parakilas (1995) contends that this obsession among present day musicians with musical authenticity—or fidelity to the composer's original performance intentions—has given rise to a "cult of the composer's own performance style" (or of the composer's time and place). The roots of this conservative cult can be traced back to nineteenth century publications of critical editions of works of *the best masters* by performers and pedagogues for the

express purpose of cultivating good musical taste in young performers or other consumers of those collections (p. 14). Performance authenticity, thus described, is akin to the nineteenth century concept of *Werktreue*, or the belief in the *sanctity* or authority of the printed text and, to extend the argument, the traditional ways of performing and teaching it.

Applied to vocal and choral music education, the concept of musical authenticity is more or less coterminous with excellence in singing. Indeed, the term musical excellence is meaningless except in relation to some standard or sets of standards against which judgements can be made. Those performances that faithfully and accurately reproduce correct notes, rhythms and timbres as notated in the score and that come closest to the *ideal* of the composer's original intent—as established by academia or through definitive performances that have been fixed by electronic or other means—are judged to be authentic and therefore of superior quality. Performances that deviate overmuch from those standards are judged to be *unauthentic*, unsatisfactory, of lesser quality, or in just plain bad taste. Progress in singing is thus equated with the search for the Holy Grail of excellence, or the development of musical abilities and expertise as means of producing *definitive* or *authentic* performances according to some transcendental interpretive ideals (Caswell, 1991).

Richard Taruskin (1995), however, challenges this definition of musical progress on the grounds that the present is our only known reality. The past, because it is only as we can imagine it, is doubtful and unreliable. Thus, any attempts to reclaim the composer's specific wishes and intentions with respect to actual performance practices are potentially fallible and, possibly, misguided. Besides, as Peter Kivy (1995) explains, there is simply no good reason to believe that composers have a monopoly on good taste, even when performing their own works (p. 178). What Taruskin is concerned with, of course, is that performers, teachers, and students, thinking that composers' ideas as presented in scores (or in so-called "definitive" performances and recordings) are inviolable and that there are few alternatives from which to choose when it comes to performance practice, fail to inject needed vitality and spontaneity into the music of the past. The performance of classical music, Taruskin believes, is becoming increasingly stodgy (Jackson, 1996, p. 2).

### The Relation Between Musical Authenticity and Authority

As has already been suggested, implicit in the quest for musical authenticity, but also just about any form of human endeavour involving the development of expertise and standards of taste, is some form and degree of authority. As defined by *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (1976), the word authentic means "authoritative," or "worthy of acceptance or belief as conforming to fact or reality." Musical authenticity implies a correspondence with truth as defined by some authority, in this case the composer or his de facto representative, the performer or teacher. In one sense, to make a claim to musical authenticity is to assert that one has the authority, by dint of superior technical and musical knowledge, to speak on the composer's behalf—that one is privy to his mind. It is this privileged disciplinary knowledge and understanding that purportedly authorizes musical experts to act as gatekeepers to the great masterworks and to dictate how they ought to be performed (Williams, 1993, p. 47; Subotnik, 1996, p. 251)

Authority often implies power, although contrary to what some poststructuralists suggest (e.g., Citron, 1993; Shepherd, 1993), the two are not synonymous. Nor, as I explain shortly, are they always undesirable. Musical experts or authorities, because they possess privileged musical knowledge and understanding, play a significant role in setting and perpetuating musical standards. In other words, they wield considerable power and influence over the minds of others. But while musical experts play an important, and even necessary, role in propagating musical beliefs, practices, and standards, problems arise when those authorities assume autocratic and absolutist attitudes. This is what most concerns poststructuralist and other critics—that musical experts impose on society, and on children in particular, their own narrow fundamentalist musical agendas in the well-meaning but mistaken belief that only they know what is *good* music or performances of same; that they have a monopoly on “the powers of perception” (Williams, 1993, p. 47). Performance fundamentalism, thus understood, refers to authoritarian and dogmatic attempts by expert performers, scholars, teachers and directors to impose rigid normative and absolute standards on vocal and choral performance practice as means of achieving exemplary, authentic, or *authoritative* performances.

However, ordinary people, it needs to be said, are seldom inert recipients of canonical knowledge. As Parakilas (1995) explains, a musical canon “is a social construct that has no force until individuals use it, and by then they have already reconfigured it in their individual ways — ‘insinuated their countless differences’ into it” (p. 20). They anonymously and covertly manipulate canonical musical knowledge as means of resisting, transforming, or subverting social authority and power. But while that may be case, it would be equally misguided to presume that ordinary people or non-experts know what is best musically. Ordinary people and amateurs can be just as sentimental and self-deluded about their resistance to authority as those championing the autonomy of genius. Indeed, as sociologist Simon Frith found in his 1981 survey of British rock fans, “even people with an ideology of individual taste” stress “the importance of shared musical taste for friendship” (quoted in Parakilas, 1995, p. 21). While busily resisting or subverting the authority of the “traditional” musical canon, those individuals go about constructing their own canonized musical knowledge. What they fail to realize is that they are simply replacing one form of musical authority with another, albeit possibly a more humane one<sup>3</sup>. More often than not, those individuals “adopt the same exclusionary principles, preferring alternative essentialisms to the open forum” (Williams, 1995, pp. 72-73; Subotnik, 1996, p. xlv).

Contrary to what some poststructuralist writers seem to be suggesting (e.g., Attinello, 1994), personal musical empowerment is never a question of rejecting musical authority *tout court* but of becoming consciously aware of the ideologies underlying composition, performance and teaching practices—including one’s own—as means of intelligently deciding where one stands in relation to them and, where necessary, changing, transforming, or, in certain cases, abandoning them<sup>4</sup>. Regardless of the musical canons, ideologies, and authorities to which one subscribes, the danger, as Kivy warns, is in taking them as articles of unquestioned faith or dogma. When that happens, and particularly in the absence of criticism and dissent, they cease to be rational. Implicit in any conception of freedom of musical expression is the necessity of dissent, for, as John Stuart Mills tells us, where propositions of truth “cease to be dissented from, at least in

argument, they literally cease to be understood" (Kivy, 1995, p. 175).

Following this line of reasoning, there are no absolute answers when it comes to vocal and choral performance practice (or, as will be shown, pedagogy) although this should not be interpreted to mean that everything is relative. Indeed, Kivy contends that while composers are fallible, their wishes and intentions with respect to performance are still the best places to start if for no other reason than our modern western cultural system demands it. Embedded in contemporary western culture is a deepseated need to know "who did, said, composed, or performed what." It is from this culture of the author and identity that composers, performers, teachers, and directors obtain their *prima facie* authority, although this does not mean that one necessarily has to slavishly conform to their wishes, intentions, or expectations. All that is meant is that knowledge of the composer's wishes and intentions, coupled with knowledge of performance practices and any other relevant information, helps establish the parameters within which individual musical creativity is meaningful. To fail to take those parameters into account when preparing a performance is to risk hubris.

The task of performers, Kivy believes, is to prepare their own versions or interpretations of given musical works in light of, but not bound by, past practice and tradition. All that can reasonably be expected of them is that they provide plausible and, hopefully, original interpretations of given works based on their understandings of past and present practice. Implicit in this are two forms of authenticity. The first is historical authenticity in the sense of being aware of and to some extent true to past and present practice, while the second is personal authenticity, meaning that the musician is true to herself; that her performance is a reflection of her own musical understandings and personality (Kivy, pp. 108, 134). Performers should intelligently use canonical musical knowledge as a basis and potential framework for determining their own musical tastes and viewpoints. When performing, the idea is not to simply replicate what others have done, but to use that knowledge as a foundation for constructing alternate and original understandings and interpretations that are extensions of one's own authority and personality (Kivy, 1995, p. 123).

This is what Eleanor Stubbley (1993) is saying when she admonishes teachers to provide students with sufficient freedom, both individually and collectively, in which to develop their capacities to project and control musical sounds within the contexts of individual works and performances thereof. Traditional understandings of compositions as represented by scores and past performance practices play a necessary and important role in defining socially acceptable parameters within which contemporary performers can make decisions. But if those performers are to realize their musical and creative potentials they will need to go beyond the score and past performance practice to construct their own unique understandings of the works in question (p. 99). Success, or excellence, is thus measured not so much according to whether the performers demonstrate mastery of the skills and abilities needed to realize a particular work, as whether they have managed to inject something of their own personal style and originality into the performance such that it is distinguishable from others; that their performances have personal and musical integrity (Kivy, 1995, pp. 108, 134).

Vocal and choral performance, as well as teaching and directing for that matter, are thus necessarily pluralistic. However, it would be a mistake to think, as Taruskin does, that composers—and by extension performers, teachers, and

directors—have no more claim to musical authority than anyone else (Kivy, p. 192). Poststructuralists such as he impugn the authority of the author or composer, for in the culture of anonymity, which they espouse, “the composer’s authority holds no more sway than anyone else’s, over his text, which is no longer his, over its destiny, which, a fortiori, is his no longer” (Kivy, p. 189). They also don’t like the assertion that so-called “privileged” musical knowledge does in fact authorize performers, teachers, and directors to have a disproportionate say with respect to matters of vocal and choral performance practice (although this does not mean that they have the only say, or that they are entitled to act as tyrants, either).

## Pedagogical Fundamentalism

Feminist Patricia O’Toole (1993/1994) is one such critic who rebels against the authority of the choral director and teacher. Charging that the hierarchical power structure implicit in choral pedagogy renders singers subservient to the director’s authority (read power) and control, O’Toole contends that both directors and choristers are unwitting victims of a male-dominated choral pedagogy based on “value-laden assumptions of the western canon” that needs to be subverted and disabled (p. 76). Choral pedagogy, because it, too, consists of conventional knowledge that has been canonized by previous composers, performers, conductors, and teachers, and because it ranks choristers according to musical knowledge and ability, is a form of normative and hegemonic discourse that legitimates the director’s authority while devaluing the contributions of choristers. Describing choral pedagogy as “boring, tedious, and overly controlling” of students’ personal musical lives, O’Toole charges that it is inegalitarian in nature because it sacrifices individual and collective freedom for the sake of achieving meticulous control and, thereby, superior performances.

But while many people would probably agree that traditional choral pedagogy and methodology need to be less constricting and more creative, along the lines of what has already been proposed above, O’Toole fails to propose reasonable alternatives. Her critique is thus not a constructive one. As the philosopher Lawrence Cahoon (1988) points out, terrorist deconstructivist interventions to reveal and undermine political power structures, “leave no room for positive conceptions of human nature and thus for the positive political conceptions essential to social reform” (p. 230). It is difficult to imagine what alternatives O’Toole might have in mind. Moreover, as Cahoon continues, purely negative criticism contributes to a relativisation of authority that can encourage “the self-serving, aggressive and paranoiac tendencies of any political community” (p. 231). Before we start trying to subvert the authority of traditional choral pedagogy and practice we had better have positive alternatives in mind. Otherwise we might end up with something worse.

Nevertheless, O’Toole might be right that teachers and directors are too controlling of students’ musical lives; that they don’t provide them with sufficient kinds and amounts of musical freedom to allow them, as Stublely and others (e.g., Woodford, 1996a, 1996b) argue, to develop to their full potential. And to a certain extent, O’Toole might also be correct that teachers are themselves victims of choral pedagogy and methodology, although not necessarily for the reasons she gives. Few music teachers realize that the epistemology of knowledge and practice upon which choral pedagogy and methodology in the schools are usually

based—according to which musical content is artificially neatened into atomic patterns organized sequentially and taught systematically from basic to advanced levels — has itself been severely critiqued by numerous philosophers and scholars (e.g., Schon, 1987; Spiro, Vispoel, Schmitz, Samarapungavan & Boerger, 1987).

Current thinking in educational philosophy, and even the philosophy of science, suggests that this overly calculated, “scientific” approach to choral pedagogy and methodology may be needlessly restrictive, and in some cases possibly wrongheaded, with respect to what and how music gets taught in the school. For example, many of the developmental assumptions upon which choral pedagogy and methodology in the schools are based, including many previously taken for granted Piagetian notions about the invariance of developmental stages of cognition or the appearance of logical thought, have been shown to be wholly mistaken (Thomas, 1997, pp. 89-90; Woodford, 1996, p. 89). Yet, these and many other uncritically examined assumptions continue to drive elementary music education.

One reason why elementary music education is slow to respond and change in accordance with current research and thinking about the nature of truth and knowledge is that monolithic intellectual constructions, including educational theories and methodologies, seem to take on a life of their own. Once institutionalized, they tend to become self-perpetuating orthodoxies that colour our ways of thinking about, and our perceptions of, the musical world; that discourage rational critique while demanding virtually absolute adherence on the part of teachers and students alike (Thomas, 1997, p. 87). Choral directors and teachers may well “insinuate their countless differences” into choral pedagogy and methodology (Parakilas, 1994, p. 20), but they seldom publicly question the authority of traditional teaching canons. Indeed, many still seem to believe that there is, or ought to be, “a correct” method of teaching singing based on purely scientific principles (Phillips, 1992, p. 568).

Because fundamentalism is built into the very foundations of the traditional approach to choral pedagogy and methodology in the schools, teachers might not always realize when they are being subjected to, or are themselves guilty of imposing on children, rigid normative standards of choral performance practice, pedagogy and methodology. In the long run, however, fundamentalist approaches to music teaching and learning probably discourage students lacking sufficient skill or interest from participating in formal musical activities. If so, then teachers pursuing fundamentalist agendas might only be contributing to the increasing marginalization of vocal and choral music performance in the school and community (Subotnik, 1996, p. xx).

## Defining Musical and Educational Practice

The problem of fundamentalism in singing is a serious one, for, as Kivy (1995) suggests, the ultimate success or failure of any particular performance strategy, methodology, or even entire choral program is determined not just by the experts, but through practice within the wider musical and educational communities. Practice, as defined herein, refers not just to what expert musicians and music educators do (Elliott, 1995, p. 69), but to the myriad ways in which musical and educational tastes and values are shaped and then continually reshaped through socialization within the larger cultural community<sup>5</sup>. Expert performers and

teachers are deluding themselves when they think only they or other pedagogues know what is good musically or what counts as musical and educational knowledge. For as Kivy explains, in a democratic society "the audience, the performer, [the teacher] the critic, the impresario, the publisher, and the recording company are all intertwined in a complex social dance" (p. 183). They all have some role to play in the social construction of musical tastes and values.

In the end, though, it is the public that has the final say. "However complicated by ideology and normative considerations the performer-listener relation may be, it is, in the last analysis, one of consumer to provider, in which any performance strategy, including the composer's, ultimately stands or falls at the pleasure and is measured by the pleasure of the audience" (p. 184). Unless vocal and choral teachers are more inclusive, progressive and open-minded with respect to what and how music gets taught and performed they may continue to lose ground in the school and community (although this should not be interpreted to mean that they should only give audiences what they want).

The litmus test for assessing the success of vocal and choral pedagogy and methodology is not whether students can sing easily and accurately as means of producing historically authentic, and therefore superlative, performances, but whether sufficient numbers of graduates from the educational system continue to sing and to support live music performance in the schools and community through their tax dollars and box office receipts. If, in a democratic musical society, composers, performers, and teachers are to continue to exert an influence on society, and if their authority is to be something more than a chimera, they will require the legitimacy of public support<sup>6</sup>. Fundamentalist agendas, because they reduce levels of active participation of students, and because they are too exclusive and not sufficiently representative of the public's musical interests and abilities, are counter-productive and, in the long run, potentially self-destructive.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Interestingly enough, Williams (1993) complains that poststructuralist and other writers, such as feminist Susan McClary, often only exacerbate the problem of limited repertoire by focussing exclusively in their critiques on selected masterworks such as Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. This over-reliance on the masterworks, even as a subject of critique, contributes nothing to the broadening of the base of the canon (pp. 72-73).

<sup>2</sup> As Citron (1993) points out, whereas analysts generally recognize that performance practice is subject to canonization, few realize that factors such as "spatial relations among performers, facial and body movement, clothing, and class and gender" enter into the picture. These, and other performance conventions (e.g., notes, scoring, tempos, ornaments, number and types of performers etc.) are important "because they reflect and re-construct societal value systems and power relations" (p. 209).

<sup>3</sup> Moreover, it should be pointed that although the term musical canon

implies some high degree of musical consensus, within any tradition and practice, "various and even contradictory models of canonic performance" can exist (Parakilas, 1995, p. 13). Several or more teachers and pedagogues, for example, can insist that they alone have a monopoly on musical taste and truth with respect to matters of performance. In such cases it remains for individual students and the society as a whole to determine which of those, if any, are necessarily better (Kivy, 1995, pp. 183-184).

<sup>4</sup> The writings of postmodernist philosopher Michel Foucault are often used by critics to condemn the authority of the western canon. However, while Foucault was interested in analyzing the relation between authority and freedom, he did not in fact mean to suggest that freedom implies an absence of authority (Barry, Osborne, & Rose, 1996, p. 8).

<sup>5</sup> As Kivy (1995) explains, musical taste is "not a constant but a variable. It does not sit as an unwavering judge of a changing musical practice but is itself changed by the changing practice that it judges" (p. 175). Moreover, the composer's intentions, like the performer's, are "subject to the tribunal of experience, of musical taste, and must be verified or disconfirmed case by case, in the hurly burly of musical practice" (pp. 178-179).

<sup>6</sup> As Saul (1995) writes, from the beginning of the humanist tradition of political thought, the citizen was identified as the ultimate source of political legitimacy for government (p. 61).

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