

Mentoring the Artistic Side of the Singer

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In the course of defending his theory of emotion against its critics, William James once raised the question whether a dog is happy because he wags his tail or whether he wags his tail because he is happy. In other words, does the physiological reaction trigger the psychological or is the reverse true. At first glance, this may seem to have little, if anything to do with singing. But, in fact, it has a great deal to do with it because it calls our attention to the difference between knowledge and understanding. We know that the dog is happy because he is displaying behaviors with which we associate happiness in dogs. But we do not thereby achieve an understanding of which of the two reactions—the physiological or the psychological—comes first.

Singers are in a similar situation as they prepare a piece of vocal music for performance. They bring to their preparation a great deal of knowledge about proper singing technique, correct diction, and a knowledge of music history and theory. What they generally do not bring to that preparation is any significant degree of understanding of such matters as the intention of the composer and the extent to which the performer can, or indeed, should attempt to realize this intention. They bring little understanding of the relationship between text and music and of the relationship between the musical work as composed and the musical work as performed, that is, whether the work as written or its performance is really the work.

The answers to these questions are the task of the aesthetician. Unfortunately, singers, in common with practitioners in the other arts (both performing and non-performing), seldom, if ever, give much thought to the potential contribution of the philosophical discipline of aesthetics to their artistic activity. Several teachers and researchers, concerned with this situation, have responded to the call of the American Society for Aesthetics for submissions to its *Newsletter* and to its website of articles and other material on the teaching of aesthetics to practitioners in the arts. Some of these writers have made an effort to suggest ways in which aesthetics can be successfully taught to students in the performing arts. Three articles that appear on the Society's website describe some of the current efforts to do this. Two of them, Jim Hamilton's "Teaching Experimental Theater" (Hamilton, 1999) and Julie Van Camp's "The Philosopher in the Dance Department," (VanCamp, 1999) offer many helpful insights. However, I found the third, Doug Arrell's article "Teaching Aesthetics to Artists" (Arrell, 1999), the most useful in attempting to devise a strategy for teaching aesthetics to singers.

Arrell contends that there are common problems shared by those who seek to teach aesthetics to theatre art students (his particular field of specialization) and those who seek to teach ethics to business school students. In each case, practitioners already in the field have, as often as not, learned their trade on the job. As a result, the knowledge they have acquired has largely been based on intuition and common sense. There has been, moreover, a view of anything academic as impractical and, therefore, of little value.

Using a case method approach, the business schools discovered that philosophical ethics had much to offer their students. It enabled those students to make business decisions in situations where intuition and common sense were not enough. They discovered that they had, in Arrell's words, acquired an "ethics edge." Using the same case method approach, Arrell likewise discovered that the application of philosophical aesthetics to their field helped his students make aesthetic decisions in situations where intuition and common sense were not

enough. Paralleling the experience of the business school students, Arrell's students discovered that they had acquired an "aesthetics edge" as a result of their experience.

Typical of the aesthetic dilemmas that Arrell (1999) posed for his students is the following:

You are a woman whose first play is to be produced by a local company. The director, an older man of great professional experience, urges you to make some changes in the script to make the action more logical, the suspense stronger, and the climax more satisfying. The dramaturge of the company, a strongly feminist university teacher, urges you not to make the changes. She suggests that the kind of dramatic structure the director wants reflects male thinking and male values; the traditional dramatic structure is overly rational, aggressive and "ejaculatory," while women's experience is intuitive, discontinuous and multi-orgasmic. Your play correctly expresses a woman's affinity with a non-linear, multi-leveled, non-goal-orientated structure. Should you make the changes or not? (Aesthetic Dilemma #3)

The end result of using the case method approach, and from the standpoint of both groups of students, the most significant result, was greater sophistication and, therefore, greater effectiveness in handling dilemmas that could not be resolved through the use of intuition and common sense alone. This, in turn, enhanced the students' chances of success in a highly competitive field.

The situation in which students of singing find themselves is similar to that of Arrell's students and the business school students. Conservatories and music schools, at least those in the United States, in which singers (along with most other musicians) are trained, place little emphasis upon any kind of academic discipline. These academic disciplines, collectively known as "academics," are included in the curriculum of those conservatories and music schools largely because their completion is required by state departments of education before they will allow the conservatories or music schools to grant a degree. As a result, even the most unperceptive student soon learns that "academics" can be treated very casually.

There is, however, another, and perhaps more important reason why singers give little thought to aesthetics. They regard it as irrelevant. To them it is so much dealing in abstractions and so much academic nitpicking about matters that are of little concern to them. Their almost exclusive concern is to develop their performing skills to the point where they can launch a professional career and they do not see aesthetics as a means for achieving this end. If one considers the way in which aesthetics is commonly taught, there is more than a little justification for this point of view. Courses in aesthetics as commonly taught are irrelevant to the needs of those whose goal is to become a professional singer. The courses are usually taught by philosophers to students in philosophy or to those who are willing to walk the philosopher's walk and to talk the philosopher's talk. If aesthetics is to become relevant and a vital part of the training of singers and if it is to be perceived by them as such, teaching it requires a wholly new approach. It is the purpose of this paper to suggest one such approach. Although this approach draws upon Arrell's work in many ways, there are significant differences.

One difference is that the aesthetic dilemmas facing singers sometimes are and sometimes are not identical to those faced by practitioners in theater and the other arts. Arrell identifies four classic aesthetic issues that he regards as of concern to his students: the role of authorial

intention, the nature of expression, the nature of realism, and the art as moral teacher versus art-for-art's-sake debate. This parallels issues of concern to singers only in a very general way. Singers are, for example, certainly interested in the role of authorial intention—in their case the intention of the composer and the specific means used to realize this intention. They are also concerned with issues that Arrell does not mention. Among these is the relationship between text and music in performance.

The course that I propose offering will be divided into two parts. The first part is designed to provide students with a background in current aesthetic theory and an insight into the way in which philosophers think. This will consist of discussions based on material from the second edition of Monroe C. Beardsley's (1981) book *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*. Since the text of the revised edition is essentially the same as that of the original 1958 edition, Beardsley provides a postscript entitled "Postscript 1980—Some Old Problems in New Perspectives." The postscript is needed—largely because the field of aesthetics in 1980 was not the same as it was in 1958. The same argument can be made today about the 1980 revision. It is for this reason that the background material should and, hopefully, eventually will be included in a textbook that grows out of the course itself. In the meantime, Beardsley's 1980 revision of his book—even though it may well be looked upon as somewhat dated—nevertheless presents a balanced account of aesthetic theory and one that is accessible to non-philosophers.

I feel that it is necessary to provide this kind of background because, if singers are to benefit from viewing their art from the point of view of the aesthetician, they need to know what that point of view is.

Most of the readings from Beardsley's book will be taken from the sections on the general theory of aesthetics ("Aesthetic Objects," "The Categories of Critical Analysis," "Artistic Form," "Artistic Truth," "Critical Evaluation," "Aesthetic Value," "The Arts in the Life of Man," and "Postscript 1980"). Additional readings will come from the sections on literature ("The Literary Work," "Form in Literature," and "Literature and Knowledge") and from the section on music, "The Meaning of Music", which includes discussions of expression and signification and the relation of music to words.

In the final session of this part of the course, an attempt will be made to identify aesthetic dilemmas facing singers. These dilemmas will become the basis for the case studies used in the second part of the course. No attempt will be made at this point to suggest solutions.

The second part of the course will consist of case studies in which aesthetic theory will be applied to the solution of those aesthetic dilemmas identified in the last session of the first part of the course. Most of these dilemmas will be those that the students themselves identify. However, three are of such importance that cases will be prepared based on them whether or not the students themselves mention them.

The first of these dilemmas is: What is the vocal work? Is it the score that the composer has written and the text upon which that score is based, or is it the performance and, if the latter, is there a different vocal work each time a given composition is performed? The American national anthem and certain hymns such as "Amazing Grace" are excellent examples of the task faced by the singer dealing with this dilemma. The "Star Spangled Banner" regularly receives performances ranging from the straightforward rendition of a military band to the, in many cases, barely recognizable rendition of some pop singers. Is the pop singer's

rendition to be rejected as incorrect or is it to be regarded as a legitimate performance of the work?

The second of the three dilemmas is the intention of the composer and poet. Can the singer determine what Schubert, for example, intended in a given song? If not, what can the singer do? In the program notes that accompany Invitation Opus 111's CD recording of Rossini's *Petite Messe Solennelle*, Detmar Huchting (Huchting, 2000), the writer of the program notes reports an interview he had with the recording's conductor, Christoph Spering. Although the interview is with a conductor and the work is a choral work, the points that are made apply to the singer and all vocal music.

Spering says: "In my view, a new recording which really takes all Rossini's instructions seriously and attempts to carry them out can only enrich the current state of research into performance practices, since it sets out to reflect the composer's intentions in a very precise way. My aim is simply to read the score the way the composer saw it." Huchting's reply to this is: "Does this mean that others did not read the score correctly?" To which Spering responds: "I don't mean that at all . . . a score can be read in completely different ways. My aim is simply to try to read the score the way the composer saw it."

Spering seems to believe very strongly that one can determine the composer's intention by looking at the score and seeing what the composer has written. Is he correct?

The third dilemma is the word-music relationship and the effect this has upon performance. Is it acceptable for the performer simply to perform a composer's word setting as written, if the composer shows little sensitivity to the prosody of the language he or she is setting, or does the singer have the right, and perhaps even the obligation, to make changes? Composers who have written for the human voice have displayed a wide range of approaches to the text-music relationship. On the one hand, there have been those like Brahms who have viewed the text as a jumping off point for their musical expression. On the other hand, there have been those like Hugo Wolf, Britten, Poulenc and Virgil Thomson who have been very meticulous in adhering to the prosody of the language of their texts. What, if anything, is the performer to do?

The purpose of the case studies, and of the course generally, is not to force students to arrive at some pre-determined answers but to help them think about the dilemmas and possible solutions in a different and, hopefully, more productive way.

Reference List

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