#### WHO AM I? ATTRIBUTES OF THE SINGING TEACHER

A preliminary report on research into qualities of singing teachers

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#### **ABSTRACT**

A body of research exists that investigates the role of the teachers in the lives of students. The latest study of Hargreaves D, Welch G, Purves, R and Marshall N, (forthcoming) into the attributes of music teachers, along with the works of Yang (2002) in the field of piano pedagogy have contributed much to this debate. In the field of singing, Collins (2001), Ostrow (2002), Monks (2003), and Patenaude-Yarnell (2003) have recently reflected on desirable traits of singing teachers.

This paper seeks to investigate some of the qualities that are desirable for a singing teacher from the perspective of students, teachers and others. The balance of the teacher-performer is examined, along with personality traits, musical competency skills, knowledge of the vocal mechanism and organisation. The recent research cited above is reviewed and some new data from students and teachers is presented in an attempt to provide some guidance and solutions to the singing teaching community.

#### THE STORY SO FAR...

Patenaude-Yarnell (2003, p.256) states, "the teacher's imagination is the gift that separates the very fine teacher from the ordinary." She also comments that patience and flexibility are key elements in the teacher's armoury. The opinions of students, teachers and parents were examined by Yang (2002) with the purpose of providing some approaches to the teaching of piano to adolescents. While not directly applicable, Yang's work provides a useful framework for a study into the

advantageous attributes for the singing teacher. In her final summary, she suggests teachers enjoy and treasure the opportunity to really make an impact in their [the students'] lives with the power of music. By examining her findings in greater detail, she recommends a flexible, sensitive and innovative approach. Students commented that the most highly desirable qualities for a piano teacher were:

- Patience, understanding and a teacher who really cares about the student
- Fun and humour
- Challenges students without being overly demanding
- Kind and encouraging
- Knowledgeable

(Yang 2002, p. 16)

Collins (2001, pp 53 - 57) suggests a range of appropriate skills and attributes necessary for the teacher of young voices. Among his suggestions is the need for teachers to have a broad base of pedagogical perspectives, an understanding of physiology, and a capacity to improve, educate and encourage with at least a touch of good humour. Ostrow (2002) gives an indication of the requirements of the voice teacher from his perspective citing sensitivity, an understanding of the psyche of the student and a personal understanding of the sensations of vocal performance: in his opinion, singing teachers must be singers themselves.

The Teacher Identity in Music Education (TIME) project currently being conducted in the United Kingdom surveyed 140 tertiary music education students. Students were asked what skills it was important for a teacher to possess. Responses included high regard for "teaching skills" and "the ability to inspire and enthuse others." Good communication skills and good planning time management skills were perceived as

being just as important as specific musical skills including a knowledge of musical styles, adequate pianist etc (Hargraeves D, Welch G, Purves, R and Marshall N. forthcoming).

In another project in progress in this field, Monks (2003, n.p.) writes that one of the most important attributes a singing teacher can have is to "get the singer to discover their own voice first, then educate and develop through good vocal technique and stronger, more secure sound." She concurs with Ostrow (2002) that understanding the whole person is very much part of the singing experience for teacher and student.

From the literature, it is possible to discern the following qualities as being important for teachers of singing: enthusiasm, knowledge, flexibility, humour and patience.

#### WHAT DO STUDENTS AND TEACHERS OF SINGING SAY?

With knowledge of the literature and the fieldwork outlined in the preceding section, the author conducted two studies: one with students of singing and one with teachers of singing. The data collection for this project was almost entirely undertaken via email. Using email provided the researcher with access to a wide variety of subjects across a broad geographical range. Apart from the author's stimulus material, there was little opportunity for intrusion of the interviewer in the response period for the subjects. Baker and Johnson (1998, p.241) make the point that at times their interviewee was "making it up on the spot". It is possible, yet unlikely, that such an occurrence would take place in this process. Most respondents had time to consider their responses before replying to the request for data. It is not known whether participants "made it up on the spot", in the process of writing responses, but it was

hoped that the research design encouraged reflection. As there was no fixed schedule of questions, the respondents were invited to talk in their own words about their experiences as students and teachers of singing. There is no intention in the research to hold the responses as "truth" rather as "accounts." These "accounts" are a product of the time and place in which they were made and, if asked the same question again at a different time in a different place, the answer could be different.

## **Choice of Sample**

The sampling technique employed is theoretical sampling. This involves purposely selecting and revising the selection of the sample. The method is not blinded or unbiased and is therefore not statistically representative. Recruitment processes did not seek out particular subjects. In this way, a variety of situations could be displayed, problems raised and solutions offered.

For the first study, an upper age limit of 40 was placed on the participants to ensure some kind of contemporary relevance. This was an arbitrary figure: most candidates were in their twenties. A lower age limit of 18 years was chosen to avoid ethical issues of parental consent. The twenty-one subjects in the final sample were aged between 18 and 33 years.

In the second study, 17 teachers of singing were surveyed in relation to their perceptions of the significant attributes a teacher of singing to should possess.

Respondents were asked to classify these as personal, professional, musical and other attributes. The sample included teachers who were Australian, Canadian and English professionals working in private studios and in tertiary institutions. Their students

ranged in age from 7 years to 80 years. Music styles they taught covered a wide range including, but not limited to lieder, opera, music theatre, contemporary and jazz.

#### **Research Structure**

The subjects were given a broad framework of the purpose of the study and asked to participate by giving an account of their experiences as students and teachers of singing. A number of strategies have been used to ensure the analysis is well argued and draws appropriate conclusions. The use of email has meant that the subjects' own words are used in the examples given below. Wherever feasible, detailed quotes have been included to illustrate the argument. Using a technique employed by Green (1997), more than one response has been included in instances when different candidates have given almost identical responses to each issue. The meanings of these quotes are related to the existing literature as outlined in the proceeding section. One of the reasons for providing such a detailed account of the literature is to make clear and valid connections between the current findings and research to date.

In relation to data classification, most candidates gave an account of the their experiences via email as requested. Due to the researcher being unable to redirect the response towards the topic, some subjects gave replies that appeared unrelated to the topic. It was also found that some of the most enlightening information came from these excursions from the topic.

On completion of the data-gathering phase, the researcher collated the responses. In reading of the material, the aim was to find similar themes and trends. The researcher also looked for ways in which the responses differed radically from each other and the

factors that may have contributed to those differences. The foundations for these themes and differences could be found in the existing literature and the experience of the researcher as a singing teacher.

# Study 1: Attributes considered important by students of singing

Based on these foundations, the following attributes emerged from the reading of the responses from students of singing:

- A genuine love of music
- The importance of the role model
- Enthusiasm and encouragement
- Choice of repertoire

The author found that from a sample of 21 subjects, there was little correlation with the earlier research. Only knowledge, encouragement and enthusiasm were clearly articulated by students. Almost all candidates reported the influence of a close family member or music teacher as having fostered their interest and talent. One subject reported:

My first teacher was a man who really instilled a love of music in me. He encouraged me to write my own songs and gave me many opportunities to perform these.

Another subject recognised that not all good musicians are necessarily good teachers.

My teacher was a high school student who apparently was an excellent musician but lousy teacher. The feedback I was given regarding my performing was less than satisfactory which affected my progress and enthusiasm.

This would appear to conflict with the suggestions of Ostrow (2002) that the singing teacher needs to be a performer. Not all performers are good teachers but an understanding of performance is essential: some performers will have the capacity to

teach. Subjects also commented on the positive effect of teachers as role models. For many, this contributed to their perseverance with music:

Through singing I was able to get respect from both students and staff who had previously thought me worthless - it gave me pride in myself and a career to aim for...

Thanks mainly to the music teachers at that time, we were given the opportunity to do and see things that your average student would not...it was during this part of my life that I began thinking about continuing music as a full-time career.

Like Yang's (2002) respondents, one subject notes that competence as well as enthusiasm was relevant. It has already been recognised that competence without enthusiasm is not adequate for teachers of music.

[The teacher]... encouraged me to compose more and gave me every [singing] performance opportunity he could. He constantly guided me whilst never making me be something I was not.

Music teachers were seen to inadvertently discourage students. An insensitive music teacher, it was found by Higgins (1999, p.20) could subject a student to the "risk of humiliation" for a seemingly insignificant event, like cracking on a note when singing. For some subjects, the process of discouragement continued throughout the school system:

[The teacher]... went on to do his best to keep me down. He really gave you the impression he was worried about you becoming better than him and made sure that everyone knew how good he was.

Repertoire selection has also been mentioned as an important factor in students' participation in singing. Higgins (1999, p.21) suggested that the correct choice of music was not just a matter of "getting it right at the technical level." She goes on to suggest that good repertoire does not have to be emotionally serious and

philosophical. This will be pursued as part of the second study with teachers of singing.

## Study 2: Attributes considered important by teachers of singing

The responses of teachers were collated in a similar manner to the student replies.

Key issues to emerge are perhaps best summarised by one respondent who remarked on the aspect of relationship:

Because we often see the same kids for a number of years, we establish different kinds of relationships with them. So, the question is, does it take a special kind of person to do this, on top of the actual teaching?

In endeavouring to discover what kind of person this is, responses were studied and categorised into two broad areas, each with a pool of attributes:

### A. Knowledge and skills

- Knowledge of the body (physiology), breathing, voice types
- Repertoire knowledge
- Aural, keyboard and language skills
- Organisational skills

# B. Relational skills

- Understanding of individuality
- Psychology
- Communication
- Encouragement and enthusiasm
- Patience

### A. Knowledge and Skills

Knowledge was seen as an absolute fundamental and respondents rated it highly by the frequency and ranking of their responses. In relation to the physical aspects of teaching, respondents commented on this in the following manner saying that a teacher should have:

knowledge of the fundamentals of vocal physiology

a thorough knowledge base in music, voice science and vocal technique

a thorough knowledge of vocal physiology and how to apply/explain it in its simplest form

[to] continually review the basics - posture and breathing

Respondents also referred to the need for an understanding of the specific requirements of each voice type:

a knowledge of the similarities and differences in dealing with the male and female voice (also 'young' vs 'mature')

A knowledge of voice types other than one's own including repertoire and technical idiosyncrasies pertinent to different voice types

Another perspective on the physical nature of singing was raised by some respondents:

[to be]a good observer of the physical alignment of body

An understanding of the body in relation to postural alignment, Alexander & Feldenkrais: This is a biggie!!! If we could all sort this one out life would be healthier and happier all round

Some commented on the need to continue to expand their knowledge through various forms of professional development with remarks such as:

[teachers need to have a] firm understanding of vocal technique but awareness of new research, ability to pass this on without confusing or frightening singer.

[there should be] a desire to keep learning and update ones knowledge and skill base.

[teacher should possess] knowledge of wide range of repertoire but able and willing to adapt to new ideas"

This final respondent began to refer to issues of repertoire. One respondent believed it was important to keep an open mind about all musical styles:

You cannot expect a student to take up Mozart or Haydn if you're not prepared to show the same willingness with Avril or Bob Marley

Most others commented in relation to repertoire knowledge. Some responses included the need for teachers to have:

A broad knowledge of ... repertoire and the suitability of such repertoire for the various stages of a student's progression.

An understanding of different performance styles and the repertoire and technical demands appropriate to them.

Understanding of appropriate repertoire and the knowledge of the business and the tasks involved is paramount

The respondent above referred to the business of teaching. Two respondents commented specifically on this attribute with references to timetabling skills, ethical issues and being punctual. In relation to specific musical skills, several respondents referred to the need for keyboard skills:

[Teachers should be] either a sensitive accompanist or able to employ one

I believe singing teachers should be excellent musicians and be able to accompany and coach.

[Teachers should possess] adequate keyboard and language skills as required.

Others added the need for ear training as an important attribute with remarks suggesting the teacher have:

A phenomenal ear for detecting vocal changes

A well attuned ear.

#### B. Relational attributes

As stated at the beginning of this study, relationships are central to teacher-learner interaction. This is perhaps more so in singing because the connection with the voice is so personal. Many respondents commented on the need for an individual approach. Comments included:

You need to understand the whole person, the voice is the body and the mind and the soul

I think the number one attribute (in any area) is the ability of the vocal teacher to approach each voice as an "individual". Each has its own unique qualities, in both the strengths and the areas of weakness; identifying key areas where improvement is necessary and prioritising them.

No two students are the same, nor is their individual understanding of the teacher's delivery.

Two respondents raised the valid point that, because of the relational nature of the singing teacher's work, a student and teacher may not get along. This caused the respondents to comment on this as being a significant attribute:

[the teacher should possess] an ability to realise that he/she may not have all the answers for any one particular student. The teachers also need to have a good and current self understanding of their own capabilities, when to let students go, for example and when they are faced with their own limitations in terms of the progress of the student.

Several respondents also commented on the need for an understanding of psychology with comments that included:

[Teachers should have the] ability to vary ones approach as required by the psychology (pathology!!) of any particular student

[A capacity to recognise] the signs of psychological well-being or not

[There is a need for] understanding of the psychology of learning... I say this because as we know singing can be a confronting thing for some people emotionally.

Associated with these relational skills is the need to be an effective communicator.

Almost all respondents referred to this, with the most relevant comments being:

A teacher of voice should possess good counselling skills; good listening and communication skills.

Flexibly delivered communication is paramount.

Related to this is the role of the teacher as counsellor. One respondent commented on this, but cautioned against taking it too far:

The singing teacher needs to have the ability to be sympathetic and have good counselling skills but also to know when to draw the line and remember you are being paid to teach singing.

The same respondent resonated with Ostrow's (2002) suggestion that the teacher must be a performer in stating:

A singing teacher should be someone who performs, understands the stresses and strains, highs and lows, who can teach communication skills effectively

The relative benefits of the teacher-performer were discussed earlier in the article.

One of the few attributes to be consistently identified through the literature and the

first study was enthusiasm and encouragement. Comments from teachers in this regard included:

The singing teacher should have enthusiasm for music and life and for singing voice.

They should be someone who can encourage, enthuse and inspire

The voice teacher should offer constant encouragement and/or constructive criticism

One of the most important pieces of data in relation to encouragement was from a respondent who offered this advice:

A singing teacher should possess an ability to maintain a supportive and encouraging atmosphere in the studio but aiming for student independence, not dependence.

The final attributes to be mentioned by respondents were in relation to enjoyment, humour and patience. Comments included:

The singing teacher should be someone who enjoys teaching, discovering voices, helping to bring out the best in people.

You need to have a sense of humour.

You should have an understanding of what gives oneself one's sense of joy in music making and a commitment to making time to do it.

It is perhaps significant that every respondent made some reference to patience as a key attribute.

### AND FINALLY...

From the existing literature and the preliminary data presented from the two current studies, it is apparent that the following attributes are considered desirable by researchers, singing students and teachers. Detailed analysis of the data and further

research is required to quantify these qualities and bring them into practice for teachers of singing:

- Respect for the individual, with an emphasis on flexibility
- Knowledge of the physical aspects of singing
- Knowledge of appropriate repertoire
- Aural, keyboard, language and organisational skills
- Being able to communicate effectively with enthusiasm, encouragement, good humour and patience.

One of the most significant responses came from a subject who quoted James Jordan (1996, p. 12) saying 'if those kids are there every week to work with you they are there because of you, not despite you'. Students sing for the human connection, and the connection is often with the singing teacher.

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