



National Schools of Singing and Their Impact on Teaching Vocal Pedagogy and Literature

Rachel J. Holland
Christopher Newport University
1 University Place
Newport News, VA 23602

The teacher of vocal academic courses in America faces a unique challenge in Western music. Western classical music was born and developed centuries ago and has a long standing tradition in Europe, while the United States' tradition can only boast a relatively short lifespan. America's legacy in Western classical music has only truly come forward within the last century, inheriting the genre from the Western Europeans, including the styles and tendencies that grew from each country's sensibilities and unique national personalities.

In the arena of vocal music, we have inherited the rich vocal tradition of Italian opera, the high romantic style from Germany, the rich impressionistic style from France. American music, therefore, "has become as eclectic as the cultures which make up her population."¹ While American composers have benefitted from selecting the very best from each nationalistic style, American composers have struggled to find unifying characteristics. It is just within the past generation's lifetime that composers have been trained in America. It was more common in the years previous, that aspiring composers would travel to study with the great instructors in Europe. With the emergence of highly rigorous music conservatories in the United States, it has become commonplace for young American composers to receive most if not all their compositional training within the United States. Composers like Samuel Barber, Leonard Bernstein, and Dominick Argento received their formal education almost entirely in conservatories within the United States. While these three composers are thought of as distinctly American in their compositional personalities, each has elements of European styles scattered throughout their music.

¹ Carol Kimball. *Song: A Guide to Art Song Style and Literature*. Revised Edition. Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Corporation, 2005.



As a reflection of the eclecticism of American composition, so has the North American school of singing become a mixture of technique and methods. Richard Miller states:

The “melting pot,” ... might be assumed to have produced a uniquely American vocal ideal. Such is not the case, ... coexistent threads of vocal pedagogy are clearly visible. There is no American national school of singing because teachers trained in each of the national vocal traditions have continued to go their diverse ways; within American pedagogy there is less unity of approach than in any of the major countries of Western Europe.²

With so many differing viewpoints on healthy technical production within the American academic system, the teacher of vocal academics faces many challenges, particularly in the instruction of vocal pedagogy and vocal literature. The ideology of nationalistic pedagogy is inseparable from the national style that it reflects. Undoubtedly, each technique was born from the necessity to sensitively interpret the composer’s intent and fit the tonal aesthetic ideals of the intended audiences.

Surely it need not be argued that diversity with regard to the technical aspects of tone production exists among singers. It must be equally apparent that the technical means expressed within various pedagogies have developed in response to specific aesthetic goals.³

The problems are two-fold for the teacher of pedagogy and literature: the successful navigation of the student’s pre-conceived notion of sound technique when teaching pedagogy as well as the student’s already established taste when teaching literature. It is inevitable that the teacher of pedagogy, when explaining the voice mechanism encounter puzzled looks, sometimes even anger when the student utters something like...”but, my teacher says...” Or, it is seldom that the teacher of vocal literature will not at some point during the semester hear someone mutter to their peers ...”I just hate French music.” Navigating these challenges are possible if the instructor approaches with sensitivity and understanding.

To understand the elements that each national aesthetic brings to North American technical study, we must understand the tonal preferences and stylistic

² Richard Miller. *National Schools of Singing: English, French, German, and Italian Techniques of Singing Revisited*. Lanham, MD and Oxford: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1997, 200.

³ Ibid.



tendencies of each major national technique. Germany, France, and Italy have all contributed significantly to the vocal genre, while maintaining diverse stylistic identities and therefore, vocal techniques.

Italy is known as the birthplace of the vocal genre, specifically opera. The Italian language dictates the *bel canto* style of vocal composition, born from extreme legato, dynamic flexibility and vocal agility. The Italian vocal genre is steeped in tradition extending from its birth around 1600, embodied in the compositions of Monteverdi and Caccini, through the evolution in style of the vocal writings of Handel, Gluck, Bellini, Rossini, Verdi, and Puccini, to name a few.

From the *bel canto* style of composition has sprung the Italian school of singing. The Italian school is characterized by a system which is referred to as the *lutta vocale* (literally translated to “vocal struggle”) or *appoggio* (literally translated to “to lean on” or “support”), which is synonymous with the former. The term *lutta vocale* first appeared in a treatise by Francesco Lamperti (1813-1892), and refers to the oppositionary forces at play during breath management (*appoggio*). Lamperti’s treatise describes in detail the inspiratory tendency of the diaphragm and the abdominals to maintain their action while striving to retain air in the lungs which are in opposition to the expiratory tendency of the intercostals which strive to expel the air needed to sustain pitch. Lamperti’s states that “...on the retention of this equilibrium depends the just emission of the voice, and by means of it alone can true expression be given to the sound produced.”⁴

Francesco Lamperti’s son, Giovanni Battista Lamperti became an even more important figure in the history of the Italian school of singing. His maxims are detailed in an invaluable book called *Vocal Wisdom* by William Earl Brown, a student. He detailed his adamancy that to maintain constant legato and control over dynamic contrast, the singer must sustain consistent vibrancy of tone as a direct result of *appoggio*. Two of Giovanni Battista Lamperti’s maxims contained within William Earl Brown’s *Vocal Wisdom* plainly relate the Italianate approach to this tonal ideal.

⁴ Richard Miller. “Historical Overview of Vocal Pedagogy.” *Vocal Health and Pedagogy: Science and Assessment*. Robert T. Sataloff, Editor. San Diego, Oxford: Plural Publishing, 2006, 207.



The energy in regular vibration is constructive. The violence in irregular vibration is destructive.

Regular vibration causes the voice to be true to pitch, ringing in quality, and rich in character.

It should be noted that while these principles are innately Italian and have survived the Italian legacy, some differentiation occurred with the burgeoning vocal compositions in other nations. It became a necessity for the Italians to acquiesce the emphasis chiefly on ornate vocalism in favor of the synthesis of word and music. The emerging vocal writings in Germany and France, both movements born from textual elevation, forced the Italians to achieve a balance from the Italian audience insistence on *bel canto* (“beautiful singing”) and intelligibility of text.

Whereas opera, the chief performance vehicle for professional singing, had been Italian-centered during the 17th, 18th, and early 19th centuries, in the latter half of the 19th century other performance literatures, such as the *Lied*, the *mélodie*, the orchestrated song, and the oratorio, began to flower, gaining increasing importance toward the close of the century...Even though the Italian model was still preeminent in the international world of professional vocalism, disparate, identifiable tonal aesthetics began to flourish in France, in Germany and Northern Europe, and in England..⁵

In Germany, the romantic period marked the national identity of their distinct musical personality. Prior to the late 18th century, German composers in the vocal tradition mimicked the Italianate sensibilities, composing mostly in not only the Italian vocal style, but, in the Italian language itself. Vocal compositions in German were not of high poetic or musical integrity and were often of frivolous character, embodied in the *singspiel*, a mixture of song and drama. New poetic styles, the new expressive range of the pianoforte and the social-political climate which ensued made vocal composition in Germany ripe for exploration. German musical genius seemed uniquely devoted to the lied, which could aptly combine romantic texts with high lyricism to express German ideals of personal expression and awareness of self.⁶

In response to the colorful poetic language and highly lyrical quality of text, the German tonal model developed emphasizing sustained lyricism and variety in timbre for

⁵ Ibid., 208.

⁶ Kimball, 40.



vocal color as opposed to the highly melismatic and timbre-consistent Italian tonal preference.

To achieve this, the Germans began to adhere to the idea of *tiefstellung*, or low laryngeal positioning. By anchoring the larynx as low as possible, the resonance cavity is thereby increased in volume (size) and therefore can have a greater range of tone color.

Low-laryngeal positioning is the logical consequence of techniques which induce sensations of pharyngeal enlargement...It remains the favored laryngeal position in the German School because it contributes to the production of sound demanded by the aesthetic ideal of that particular national school. Further, it induces the kind of placement sensations associated with that ideal.⁷

Linked to laryngeal positioning is the Germanic idea of *Deckung*, or cover, as a means for the successful navigation of a singer's registration events. In his book, *On the Art of Singing*, Richard Miller describes the Germanic idea of cover as "demanding sudden mechanical registration actions involving laryngeal postural changes, marked pharyngeal spreading, heavy epiglottic lowering, jaw hanging, and resultant radical vowel migration."⁸

The drastic action of *Deckung* risks a heavy toll on efficiency of production...Whatever the aesthetic results, in matters of vocal health it costs more than it should.⁹

The last distinctly Germanic idea that I would like to mention is the idea of *kopfstimme*, or excessive head voice. It is not uncommon to hear a baritone in performance of Schubert's *Winterreise* employ this technique when accessing his upper range. The aesthetic demand that this accomplishes is the adherence to evenness of amplitude. In an effort to de-emphasize the higher tones, the singer will avoid the use of mixing heavy mechanism into the pitch, thereby reducing overall amplitude of the high voice. The technique is accomplished by vocalizing through the vowel [u] at the pianissimo dynamic level, loose glottal closure, and heavy breath mixture. Therefore, the vibrancy of the tone is eliminated, achieving an almost colorless sound as a means

⁷ Miller, 87.

⁸ Richard Miller. *On the Art of Singing*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, 15.

⁹ Ibid.



of creating a particular vocal quality that evokes staunchness, whiteness or tonal ambivalence.

When coupled together, the prospective low laryngeal positioning and the widened pharynx needed to achieve the desired resonance palette on the Germanic tonal preference sounds very different to the North American singer. The resultant breath management system needed to maintain this resonance balance involves highly increased breath pressure to maintain firm glottal closure.

To the North American singer, this technique can sound overly dark, hooty, and somewhat forced, correlating directly with the inefficiency that this type of technique can create. Conversely, the wide variety of timbres created suits the German aesthetic as well as serving the repertoire directly. It should be noted that while these techniques are traditionally German, that with the evolution of voice science and vocal pedagogy as a field, most teachers firmly planted in the German tonal preference are adopting a more international view of technique, integrating more efficient aspects of pedagogical technique while still retaining the most important aspect of Germanic vocal style: color.

The French have yet a different tonal preference and stylistic tendency. The emergence of the *Lied* had a strong impact on the French poets as they began to turn to elevated poetic styles “inspired by the clarity of form and declamation found in Greek poetry.”¹⁰ With the general decline in the artistic level of early forms of French vocal music and the new romantic poetry produced by Parnassian writers, composers such as Berlioz, Bizet, Massenet and Saint-Saëns “continued to develop freer forms, more lyric vocal declamation, and increased expressiveness in the accompaniment.”¹¹ Free forms and vocal declamation were seemingly opposed to the German tastes, and the French further solidified their aesthetic opposition with the emergence of impressionism. The French taste, therefore, seems to oppose German sentimentality and Italian virtuosity almost completely, forming a triangle of tonal and stylistic preferences. Pierre Bernac

¹⁰ Kimball, 157.

¹¹ Ibid.



succinctly writes of the aesthetic differences between the French and German tastes in his book *The Interpretation of French Song*.

In short, the aim [of French melodies] is to give aesthetic pleasure through pure music, stripped of all philosophical, literary, or humanistic significance, such as that which goes so willingly hand in hand with German music. Debussy goes on to write that 'clarity of expression, precision and concentration of form are qualities peculiar to the French genius'. These are qualities that are indeed most noticeable when again compared with the German genius, excelling as it does in long, uninhibited outpourings, directly opposed to the French taste, which abhors overstatement and venerates concision and diversity.¹²

Mirroring the stylistic opposition, the French also maintain pedagogical opposition with the Germans, particularly in the arena of resonance. While the German School emphasizes pharyngeal widening, induced in part by a lowered larynx, the French often search for methods to increase buccal and nasal resonance.¹³ French singing can and should differentiate between nasal and non-nasal vowels, however, "there tends to be rather consistently a veil of nasality in French vocal tone which is the product of the slightly-lowered velum".¹⁴ Richard Miller attributes this "placement of the tone in the masque and at the bridge of the nose" to the great Polish artist Jean de Reszke (1850-1925) and attributes "his principles that remain characteristic of current (but by no means all) 20th century French voice instruction."¹⁵

A second area of pedagogy that separates the French School is their belief in natural breathing and laryngeal freedom, as opposed to the more muscular approach of the German School. In its natural state, the larynx sits slightly elevated within the throat. Therefore, the French School advocates head elevation in order to 'free the larynx.' Richard Miller states that "although it may not be completely accurate to assert that teachers in the typical French School specifically request a high laryngeal position, such postural admonitions invariably produce it."¹⁶

¹² Pierre Bernac. *The Interpretation of French Song*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1976.

¹³ Miller, *National Schools of Singing*, 75.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Miller, "Historical Overview of Vocal Pedagogy," 211-212.

¹⁶ Miller, *National Schools of Singing*, 84.



The final technical element peculiar to the French is *la grimace de la chanteuse* (the singer's grimace) for high notes.¹⁷ With elevated laryngeal positioning, placement toward nasal resonance and the natural breathing method, French singers who adhere to the Reszke heritage are forced to increase the opening of the aperture at the lips to raise pitch as they ascend to the upper limits of their ranges. Miller maintains that "with a few notable exceptions, French singers have not enjoyed international careers in the later decades of the 20th century... A return to international pedagogic orientation is increasingly in progress in France."¹⁸

Finally, we come to the pedagogical viewpoint of the North Americans. As previously mentioned, American vocal writing has reaped the benefit from its delayed matriculation. Being that the United States is truly the melting pot of the world, our musical traditions have root in many different cultures. The Italian, French, German and English roots are evident in the classical genre, it cannot be denied that the influence of South American, African and Eastern music has trickled into classical music composition in America.

North American singers and teachers of singing have also been able to select the most efficient elements from each national technique. It does, however, make room for some confusion among students from studios who maintain slightly differing viewpoints. Richard Miller maintains that no unified North American school of singing exists.

The "melting pot," on the other hand, which popularly is supposed to characterize some aspects of North American culture, might be assumed to have produced a uniquely American vocal ideal. Such is not the case, for the melting process is even less complete in this area than in other cultural fields; coexistent threads of vocal pedagogy are clearly visible. There is no American national school of singing because teachers trained in each of the national vocal traditions have continued to go their diverse ways; within American pedagogy there is less unity of approach than in any of the major countries of Western Europe.¹⁹

Miller's point seems confusing upon first glance, however, his point is not that this should be viewed negatively, it is that there are a variety of viewpoints that are taught in American voice studios because North Americans have been able to select only the

¹⁷ Miller, "Historical Overview of Vocal Pedagogy," 212.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Miller, *National Schools of Singing*, 200.



most functionally efficient elements from each national technique. Therefore, we are specially equipped to handle a multiplicity of national styles.

In another book, Miller further argues his point:

Mainstream voice teaching in the United States nurtures many premier singing artists, because it remains closer to historic international pedagogic tenets than what is currently taught in some European conservatories and private studios, including those on the Italian peninsula...The mainstream, pragmatic American ideal of elite vocalism is based on free and healthy vocalism. At its best, this allows a singer to perform a wide variety of literatures, and liberates him or her for fuller realization of artistic and interpretative factors. At its worst, it can be unimaginative and boring.²⁰

It is true that there really is no aesthetic tonal preference in the United States, however, some Europeans would view our tireless effort toward functional freedom: “free and healthy vocalism,” as Miller states in his final sentence, American singers can be perceived as “unimaginative and boring.”

With so many differing points of view, how does one approach the instruction of pedagogy and vocal literature in the United States? It is incumbent upon the instructor of vocal academics to deliver a complete and accurate education to voice students, free from aesthetic and technical bias, as they are instructing students whose own teachers may adhere to different technical approaches.

When tackling the issue of pedagogy, the approach should be two-fold. First, the instructor must approach the study of pedagogy free from aesthetic bias with emphasis on vocal efficiency. Second, the instructor must deliver the facts, and only the facts, and encourage the students to interpret, and to connect the information they are given in the classroom with the information that they are given in the voice studio.

Most teachers of vocal pedagogy are themselves teachers of voice in the private studio. Undoubtedly, each adheres to his or her own aesthetic preferences and passes onto their students those techniques in which they were instructed as students. Since these ideals are held so strongly, it may be a hard task in separating oneself from technical and aesthetic bias. However, for the sake of the student of pedagogy, one

²⁰ Ibid., 193.



must do so. By approaching pedagogy from a scientific standpoint, instructing the students in physics, acoustics, and physiology and stressing the importance of physical efficiency within the vocal mechanism, the instructor of pedagogy can successfully navigate the various challenges which face him or her.

The knowledge acquired through medical and basic science research has advanced not only clinical care but also the teaching of voice. Moderate singing, acting, and speech teachers have acquired new scientific understanding of the voice and use their new knowledge to augment and refine their traditional approaches to voice training. This should lead to consistently healthier and more efficient voice training.²¹

Only through factual and indisputable information, can the teacher of pedagogy successfully fulfill their charged task, while steering clear of passing on technical bias and avoiding offending the student's (and their teacher's) already-held beliefs. If and when the factual information delivered by the instructor of pedagogy conflicts directly with the information delivered by the private voice instructor, it is the student who then has the choice between technical ideas. In the case that the private voice instructor has picked inefficient elements of national technical ideas, the student is then armed with the pertinent information and can, therefore, make their own decision regarding their technical approach.

Inevitably, a student at some point during the semester will protest, "...but, my teacher says...", which brings forward the second approach needed for appropriate pedagogical instruction. It is of utmost importance that the teacher clearly understand the student's point. Many times, it is the student who is not correctly interpreting their instructor's approach. Though voice instruction has benefitted from scientific study, the instruction that takes place within the teacher's studio is rarely delivered in scientific "speak". Most of the time, the information is delivered in practical instruction such as "open your mouth," or "relax your jaw," or in more imagery-based instruction, such as "envision the phrase as a moving sidewalk." Therefore, the semantic choices of the private voice instructor can be easily mis-interpreted. Using words such as "push" or "support" can sometimes have a negative connotation, even when applied in appropriate instruction, such as "push the air forward" or "support the tone from your

²¹ Miller, "Historical Overview of Vocal Pedagogy," 4.



diaphragm.” While technically correct, the semantic choices of the teacher can achieve the opposite of the desired effect. The role of the instructor of pedagogy is to encourage the students to reconcile the information they are given in the voice studio with that factual information they are given in the classroom. In short, encouraging the students to listen carefully, analyze critically and then actively “translate” the information that is delivered to them by their voice teacher encourages clarity and places personal responsibility upon the student. Arming them with the knowledge and confidence to make their own choices helps entrust them with their own technical development.

Therefore, the role of the teacher of pedagogy is to deliver scientific and factual information, no matter what national technical instruction his or her students are receiving in the private voice studio. By stressing the importance of vocal efficiency, functional balance while challenging the students to critically examine and interpret the instruction that they are receiving in the private voice studio, the North American instructor of pedagogy can embrace an international approach to technique, benefitting from the best elements of all national schools of singing.

There are great singers from every country who have international success because they have modified their regional or national vocal ideals. In our current global community, this is becoming increasingly the case...Fortunately for the art of singing, there are fine teachers in every nation who adhere to international vocal ideals.²²

The instructor of vocal literature faces different challenges in the classroom. Singers are routinely mistaken that to receive proper stylistic instruction in each nation’s vocal repertoire, they must adhere to that nation’s long-held technical system. The approach to teaching vocal literature must begin with a historical overview of the development of that nation’s repertoire. Arming the student with knowledge and approaching the style from an intellectual standpoint can help the student gain a better understanding and appreciation for the impetus behind the composer’s intent. Through this approach, the instructor of vocal literature can combat the stereotypical boring American singer.

²²Ibid., 192.



It is virtually impossible to teach national style without playing examples of that nation's most sensitive and reliable interpreters. When teaching the *mélodies* of Poulenc, it is an invaluable resource to play the recordings of Pierre Bernac and Poulenc himself. Or, when studying the vocal music of Benjamin Britten, one must turn to the recordings of Peter Pears. But, it is undeniable that both of these artists serve as specific examples of impeccable interpreters of their nation's tonal preferences. However, they also both serve as perfect examples of performers who stand firmly rooted in their nation's traditional technique. It is of utmost importance that the instructor of vocal literature stresses the stylistic information that the students can glean, while separating the individual technical approaches.

The instructor must teach the style in terms of vocal and stylistic demands, without endorsing a means by which they are achieved historically. It stands to reason that one cannot accurately perform *Lied* without incorporating colorful timbres into their technique, or Italian opera without means for the successful navigation of fioratura, or finally, encouraging dynamic sensitivity when performing *melodies*. However, stressing the importance of adapting one's long-studied technique to meet these stylistic demands remains the most important aspect of accurate instruction.

For premier artists, it has never been a matter of changing fundamental technique to match performance venues or literatures, but of adapting stable technique to a variety of music styles.²³

Commonly, during the course of a semester's study, the instructor of vocal literature may hear a student mutter..."but, I just hate French music..." (or German, Italian, English, etc.). It should be duly noted that even within a nation style, extreme variety exists. Encouraging students to keep an open mind and listening to their opinions can serve as an inspiration for the instructor to search for a variety of examples. Choosing a wide variety of examples, even if one has to scour more obscure repertoire, can inevitably lead to at least one example within a national style that can suit each student's taste.

²³ Miller, *National Schools of Singing*, 195.



The genre of Western classical vocal music is clearly the legacy of Western European languages. Therefore, the North American instructor of vocal academics faces some unique challenges. With so many national vocal techniques and tonal preferences being taught in the North American voice studio, navigating these obstacles may prove challenging. It is the instructor who approaches these sensitive issues through both historical and scientific fact who truly best serves the student.