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### Studio Voice: Obstacles Not Found In Applied Instrumental Study

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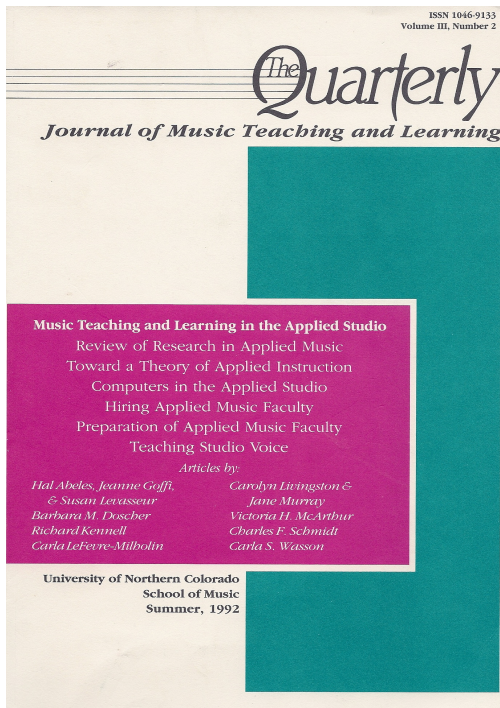
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*It is with pleasure that we inaugurate the reprint of the entire seven volumes of The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning. The journal began in 1990 as The Quarterly. In 1992, with volume 3, the name changed to The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning and continued until 1997. The journal contained articles on issues that were timely when they appeared and are now important for their historical relevance. For many authors, it was their first major publication. Visions of Research in Music Education will publish facsimiles of each issue as it originally appeared. Each article will be a separate pdf file. Jason D. Vodicka has accepted my invitation to serve as guest editor for the reprint project and will compose a new editorial to introduce each volume. Chad Keilman is the production manager. I express deepest thanks to Richard Colwell for granting VRME permission to re-publish The Quarterly in online format. He has graciously prepared an introduction to the reprint series.*

# Studio Voice: Obstacles Not Found In Applied Instrumental Study

By Carla LeFevre-Milholin

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**H**aving spent many years of my musical training as a pianist and French horn player, I am convinced that there are several aspects of the teaching of singing which set it apart from the studio teaching of other performance media. Certain psychological factors cause the singer to experience insecurities peculiar to this field of study and performance. Also, a variety of practical considerations complicate individual training in the area of applied voice. Though all musicians must cope with the psychological aspects of performing and logistical problems associated with their instruments, the singer encounters obstacles that are truly unique.

## Psychological Aspects

Singers must, more than other musicians, learn to overcome inhibitions that are instilled in us from a very young age. Early in our lives we use our voices without any restraint whatsoever. As infants, we wail when we need comfort or food. As toddlers, we scream with delight and defiantly shout our protests and demands. It is not long, however, before our parents and society begin

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placing restrictions on our vocal freedom. Does the phrase “Keep your voice down!” sound familiar? As we grow up, there are countless circumstances under which we are asked to control our voices.

The ultimate paradox in singing is that the key to technical control actually lies in the release of certain controls. The vocal restraint that society teaches us results in underlying tensions that negatively affect the singer’s technique. It is the task of the voice teacher to strip away these tensions/inhibitions—a task that can take months, even years to complete.

The singer seems to be more sensitive to criticism than other music students. In my opinion, this arises from the fact that the singer uses no external medium; the singer *is* the instrument. As a result, voice students find it difficult to separate themselves emotionally from the instrument, or to regard it as simply a piece of equipment in need of adjustment.<sup>1</sup> Instead, they react to criticism about singing in much the same way they would react to criticism regarding physical appearance. Singers often feel that a request to change the tone quality of the voice is tantamount to suggesting that they lose some weight or change the color of their hair. Regardless of our efforts to balance criticism with praise, the initial reaction (perhaps unspoken, yet visible) of the voice student to the teacher’s suggestions is often “What? You don’t like

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my voice?” Depending upon the personality of the individual student, this type of reaction can be persistent. It can also significantly impede the learning process.

Singers, more than other types of musician, present *themselves* to the audience when performing. The singer’s instrument, physical appearance, and personality are all part of the total package presented. There is no object outside of the singer that can be adjusted or blamed for poor sound—woodwind players, for instance, can always change their reeds—or that can be used to distance oneself from the audience. An instrument, regardless of its size, serves as a barrier between performer and audience, allowing the performer to feel less self-conscious. These factors combine to cause the singer to feel exposed, vulnerable, and somewhat naked.<sup>2</sup>

The instrumentalist probably has no idea to what extent his medium provides him with a crutch. It is actually quite comforting to have something in one’s hands in stressful situations; perhaps this is why Luciano Pavarotti clutches a handkerchief when performing in concert. An instrumental performer is not required to look out into the audience while playing. Some position themselves at a slight angle to the audience while playing; those who use music are able to focus their eyes on the score, and others who perform from memory may even close their eyes if they wish. In any case, instrumentalists cannot as readily see the reactions of the audience and are less likely to be distracted by them. Also, instrumentalists are not expected to enhance their musical performance through the use of facial expression and stage deportment, and therefore are not expected to take the especially vulnerable position of sharing their personalities with the audience.

These factors that affect a singer’s performance psyche also have an effect on his or

her lessons. Students regard their lessons as mini-performances, whether teachers intend this or not. They feel no less exposed before their teachers. Facial expression involves two very personal elements—physical appearance and emotion. Students are sometimes quite self-conscious and sensitive to criticism regarding this aspect of their performance. The more extroverted students are able to view facial expression as acting—the presentation of a character. Others regard it as an extension of their own personalities; therefore, asking them to alter their presentation in some way is the same as asking them to change something about who they are. In cases such as this, criticism can be met with much resistance, whether conscious or not.

Just as singers can easily see the reactions of the audience, they can also see those of the teacher. The voice student is constantly searching the teacher’s face for reactions to every sound the student makes. Even the anticipation of being met with a look of disapproval can cause the student some anxiety; therefore, it is helpful for the teacher to remain as expressionless as possible while listening.

### Trust

In order for the applied music student to become dedicated to the task of implementing the teacher’s suggestions, the student must trust the instructor’s judgment. Trust is sometimes difficult to establish in the voice studio, because the singer’s perception of his or her own sound may differ from the sound that is heard by others. A tone that may seem to the singer to have a deep, rich quality may actually be a swallowed sound, lacking in resonance and projection. A timbre that seems more pointed in focus, lighter, perhaps more effortless, may result in a larger sound than the over-darkened, tensely produced “big” quality that the student pre-

fers. The student must learn to accept and aim for the vocal production recommended by the teacher.

In no other field of musical study does one encounter such a lack of standard, universal terminology as in the area of vocal pedagogy. This can also hinder the establishment of trust. Ambiguous terms such as *open*, *closed*, *light*, *heavy*, *dark*, or *bright* may mean different things to different people. Two teachers may use the same word to describe two entirely different tone qualities, or they may use different words to describe the same quality. If a student changes teachers, or even discusses technique with the pupil of another voice teacher, a contradiction of ideas can arise. Whether this contradiction is a reality or not (and sometimes it is), the student begins to wonder, "Who's right?" As a result, the student may become less zealous in efforts to effect the changes recommended by the teacher.

### Physical and Emotional Health

Included in the responsibilities of the applied music teacher is advice and instruction in the care of one's instrument and of those parts of one's physiology essential to playing the instrument. For obvious reasons, this is a more complicated issue in the area of voice, as the instrument and player are one and the same.

It is surprising how little the freshman voice major understands about the care of his or her instrument, as compared with the knowledge of peers about the care of their violins, clarinets, and trumpets. A young clarinetist would not dream of deliberately bending the instrument's keys, but the beginning singer thinks nothing of the damage incurred to the vocal cords during hours spent at a smoke-filled party, talking loudly above the music and crowd noise. The young singer probably does not realize that even a lengthy phone conversation the night before a voice lesson might significantly affect the singer's performance in that lesson.

The singer and instructor must work around all the variables that alter the condition of the voice: fatigue, hoarseness, colds, and allergies, to name a few. Lessons are not as productive when the voice is not in

optimum health. Thus, it is essential that the singer accept responsibility for the variables that can be controlled. The student must get sufficient rest; refrain from over-use of the voice; drink more water than nonsingers; limit consumption of substances that dehydrate the vocal cords, such as caffeine, alcohol, and various medications; and avoid direct and secondary smoke inhalation. The individual student's willingness to accept this responsibility has a direct affect on the potential for improvement.

We are all aware of the influence that emotional stress has on our abilities to perform. In all cases except that of the singer, stress affects only the performer. The trumpet, for instance, does not suffer the consequences of stress; only the trumpeter does. The singer's instrument, however, can be significantly affected by the onset of stress. I know of several professional singers who have experienced difficulty in singing—one even developed vocal-cord nodules—during periods of marital crisis.

Recently I was commenting to another voice teacher that one of my more talented students was not improving, perhaps even regressing. The student's voice was not responding normally to the implementation of techniques that had served her well in the past. I described some of the vocal problems the student had been encountering, and my colleague's only reply was "roommate problems."

Although the student appeared relaxed in her lessons, I decided to explore with her the possibility that she might be experiencing anxiety of some kind. Imagine my surprise when she said, "Well, the only thing I can think of is I've been having some trouble with my roommate." When the trouble was resolved, the student's singing suddenly returned to normal.

Emotional duress triggers an automatic response in the larynx. It is similar, though milder, to the feeling one has just prior to the onset of tears. As teachers, part of our work is to identify and eliminate technical problems, but when the source of these problems is not method-oriented, as in the case described above, it is futile to continue to try to eliminate the problems through technical

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means. Perhaps that is why voice lessons can easily turn into therapy sessions. One singing teacher I know refers to himself as “full-time priest, part-time voice instructor.”

### **Prior Training and Experience**

Many vocally gifted students graduate from high school never having learned to read music. Budgetary cut-backs in our public school systems continue to modify or even eliminate portions of the music curricula. Many elementary music programs are not expansive enough to allow for continuity in the development of musical skills. High school choral programs are geared toward performance, and instructors find themselves hesitant to use rehearsal time to teach sight-singing techniques. Some singers develop music reading skills by learning to play an instrument; however, the “back-to-basics” trend in education is forcing many students to choose between vocal and instrumental studies. Consequently, there are students who do not have the opportunity to learn to read music.

Some of these students decide to pursue a degree in voice. The level of musical skill may vary among student instrumentalists, but applied teachers in this area do not have to contend with students who do not read music at all. One may wonder why colleges and universities would choose to admit students with such a deficiency. The irony is that some of the most outstanding voices belong to those who have not had the benefit of prior training in music reading. The fortunate ones have learned the basics by studying piano for one to three years, but many do not have keyboard experience. When we audition the rare singer whom we believe has the potential for a major performing career, we feel that we must give that singer a chance. I remember one such student; I assigned her a song at one of her first lessons, only to have her return the following week without having learned a single note. Her response to my disappointment was, “I thought we were just going to learn it together.” In other words, she expected me to teach her the song by rote, just

as her high school music teacher had done.

The applied studio situation is one which is unfamiliar to many freshman voice majors. Prior to choosing a career in music, instrumental players have all had at least some individual training. They are accustomed to receiving input regarding their playing and have learned the importance of a daily practice routine. (I do not assume that they have actually implemented this routine, only that they understand its importance.) This is not the case with many voice majors. For example, of the 17 freshmen I taught during the first year of my current faculty position, only three had studied privately prior to coming to college.

Many beginning singers have the misconception that singing is a skill that one acquires naturally. They have little understanding of the discipline required to achieve a solid vocal technique. They may practice just enough to learn their assigned literature, but for some reason believe that work on technique is reserved for the studio. Careful explanation of practice methods does not usually bring immediate results. An entire semester or more may pass before such students abandon the mentality that singing is something they do solely for fun.

Several reasons have been cited for voice students' exceptional sensitivity to criticism, and the absence of prior individual training can exacerbate the problem. Students who have never had a voice lesson may simply be unaccustomed to receiving criticism regarding their singing. They have probably been corrected for musical inaccuracy, but rarely, if ever, has anyone suggested they change the sound of their voices. These students are even more likely to have the emotional reactions to criticism described earlier.

### **Influence of Popular Music**

Voice students with little or no previous studio instruction come to their teachers with limited exposure to the classical repertory. The majority have elected to pursue careers in music because of the pleasure they have had singing popular music.<sup>3</sup> Many students resist



focusing their studies on classical literature because they do not find it as enjoyable; in fact, some students do not enjoy it at all.

If a performer feels no passion for this music, interpretation suffers. The same young singer whose interpretation of a popular song is quite stirring may render a performance of an art song that is virtually void of emotion. It is not only the music in the art song that such a student finds inaccessible, but the words as well. Even if the art song is in English, the text is usually derived from poetry that the student cannot readily interpret. Thus, in addition to learning to interpret classical music on a sophisticated level, as all music students must do, the voice student must also learn to understand texts that are much more complex than those previously encountered.

Not only are many voice students unfamiliar with classical vocal literature, but the sound produced by a classically trained singer may also be foreign to them. Often my young students react to the first tones they sing with abdominal support and a low laryngeal position with such comments as "That's really weird," or "That sounds fake." Teachers of instrumental performers do not have to contend with this kind of resistance from their students.

In time, most voice students learn to accept the new sound. Unfortunately, in many cases, friends and family members find it difficult to accept the change. In a world that is inundated by the style and vocal production of pop artists, the classically trained voice is perceived by many as unnatural or artificial. The nonmusician has such limited exposure to this sound that reactions to it can range from disinterest to disgust. I have listened to the grievances of countless young singers who have been deeply troubled by the hurtful comments of those whose approval is important to them. One young woman was rehearsing an operatic duet at home the day before a performance when her husband said, "Why would anyone want to sound like that?" Another student mentioned that a member of her church congregation overheard her telling someone about the literature and singing technique she was learning, and the woman muttered, "You'd better not be singing that stuff here!" The sister of a talented baritone commented after his senior recital, "I like the way you sang when you were in high school better." So much for four years of voice training.

Voice students can also be affected by strangers who respond rudely to their efforts. I was a faculty member at a school where the music building was located in the residential section of campus. Students who passed by or those who lived in the adjacent building would frequently make whooping and howling noises at the singers while they practiced, or would mock their singing by imitating an operatic sound. The instrumentalists never experienced this kind of harassment; only the voice students did. Indeed, the prejudice exhibited toward the classical vocal sound can have a profound effect on the psyche of the student singer, deterring the singer from practice and significantly undermining the student's confidence as well.

## Summary

In the voice studio, one is faced with obstacles that either do not occur at all in the applied instrumental area, or do not occur to the same extent. Some of these obstacles are the result of societal influences, such as lack of prior training and the cultural preference for popular vocal style and production. The absence of standard terminology and the vast diversity of pedagogical opinions is an idiosyncrasy of the voice profession. Most of the factors that are unique to voice study, however, arise from the fact that the performer and the instrument are one and the same. Moreover, it is essential that the voice student trust the judgment of his or her teacher in the assessment of tone quality, as the singer cannot perceive the sound accurately. Finally, physical and emotional health are particularly important to vocal performers, and they are more likely to be inhibited, insecure, and sensitive to criticism than instrumental students.

## Notes

1. This is especially true of beginning students, though more experienced students harbor some of these tendencies as well.
2. These adjectives have been used by many of my students when describing the uneasiness they experience in performance situations.
3. Though some programs are designed specifically to train commercial and musical theater singers, most college voice training is based on the techniques and literature employed in the classical genre. Comments in this section refer to the latter type of studio situation. 