Practising with Voice Visualization Software

The teacher's perspective

Teachers of voice majors at the university level, must come to a good balance between fostering the student's development on the one hand, by leading the way and giving him the technical know-how and tools for vocal development and on the other hand, allowing him to develop his self-perception and creativity by working independently outside the lesson. Of course the teaching is the foundation of development, but a young singer's ability to deal with a concert or competition situation that is less than ideal by him/herself is an essential part of success. Furthermore, I have encouraged my students to come to lessons with questions and a goal in mind: "could you work effectively on this exercise alone?" "Why do you wish to sing this piece today?" The questions a student brings to the lesson from his independent practice sessions or coaching lessons are an open invitation to effective teaching and learning. Often I begin the lesson by asking if there is a question, defining the goal in working on a certain technical aspect or repertoire, and in return, telling the student what I would like to work on. Agreeing on the content of the lesson gives both student and teacher structure and orientation.

Teachers working with younger or amateur students have the same concerns to balance, if in different proportions. Presumably, more guidance is needed from the teacher in order to overcome insecurities and encourage the development of new tone qualities. CCM singers may be overeager in trying to imitate their idols and need guidance as to their very own voice level and qualities. On the other hand, such students may have less difficulty bridging the gap to the computer than classical singers, for example.

In any case, today's teachers must realize, that the gap may be larger for them than it is for their students. When I started working with software in my teaching, I discovered quickly that even the students I had not used it with in lessons, had downloaded some form of software and were experimenting with it. This was a wake-up call for me. I had underestimated their curiosity, computer knowledge and ability to apply the spectograms to their practicing.

As a rule, motivated voice majors are very much aware of their weaknesses and will look in all available directions - including using software - for possible solutions. Young singers will look to YouTube for lessons promising quick success, all of them seek ideals and technical solutions in the Internet – either with or without a guilty conscience. It is then much better, that we deal with this in an appropriate manner within the lesson, rather than letting young people chance on systems they find accidentally.

First of all, it was important to find out which programs and equipment they were using. Many programs are easily available as free downloads or aps and they vary greatly in their kinds of images. The quality of equipment also varies widely and needs to be considered in order to avoid misleading conclusions. It is important that students can compare what they see in a lesson with what they see when practicing. This can be done either by having similar equipment and the same program or even by working with the student's equipment in the lesson.

Secondly, the teacher and student must find the appropriate balance between practicing assigned exercises and experimenting with other parameters. As they practiced with the software, they were able to work very with software effectively on well-defined parameters.

They felt that the spectograms made practise more specific because the feedback was so clear. In addition, they were able to save samples and bring them to the lesson for a cross-check as to their success.

Spectograms encourage students to experiment as their curiosity is whetted. This can be a wonderful opportunity for discovering new colours and vocal possibilities, it can also be a trap as students get distracted, misinterpret the images and waste practice time playing with the software. Since today's young students are computer natives, they have no difficulty in intuitively understanding the images, but often they lack the background knowledge as to finding physiologically correct strategies for the things they discover. It is the teacher's responsibility to keep a watchful eye on the student's experimental outings and provide the necessary guidance and information.

A third important aspect is that the questions students bring to their lessons change. They are more specific, leading to more specific answers. Said another way: communication is much simpler when there is a neutral third dimension in the form of visualization. The one-to-one relationship is defused as the discussion centers on the objective data.

I believe my students' progress has accelerated as a result and continue to encourage them to make good and appropriate use of many kinds of resources – including spectograms in their practising!

Prof. Norma Enns
President EVTA 2004-2012
University of Music, Theater and Media Hannover