

EUROPEAN VOCAL PEDAGOGY – DIGITAL RESOURCES TECHNOLOGY EVTA SESSION HELSINKI, JUNE 6 – 10, 2012

PROTOKOLL : ONLINE LESSON

Having a goal in a Master Class or one-time teaching situation has always seemed important to me. Time and again I have seen how an obviously excellent teacher is ineffective when there has been no prior contact, and both parties meet for the first time on stage with no "goal" or "aim" other than to do it "better". Both are put on the spot, and neither can do what they really are able to.

Even if the teacher is up to the challenge of choosing an effective way of working, these classes tend to end up as a performance somewhere between. In my teaching experience, one of the easiest things to do is to assess a student, and find a way of changing the singing. It is also easy to convince everyone in the room that the change is an improvement. But is this learning ?

The performance aspect of a one-time-together-on-stage class is well-nigh impossible to erase.

So what happens? Sometimes the teacher performs for the audience, sometimes teaches or seeks approval from the audience, sometimes disappears in insecurity and seldom do we feel happy, because the teacher concentrated on the student, handling all parties: the student, the accompanist, the audience, the regular teacher, the music and the artistry with respect and competence.

In a situation where we are still experimenting and dealing with a new medium, in this case, teaching online, the medium and how it changes vocal work will be central to our observations. Nonetheless, it will be my goal to forget the technology and concentrate on teaching.

PRIOR PREPARATION:

- Contact the students and their teacher to gain information as to their level of study, voice type, repertoire, possibly any specific technical questions or repertoire related issues to consider in planning the lesson.
- Ask the teacher to have spectrographic software available to the student, and to familiarize the student with the displays.
- We arranged a Skype contact with teacher and students and talked for a good half hour. It was helpful to see each other, to get an initial impression of the person, and find out a bit about their goals and questions. We also talked about using the spectrogram and downloading a free version to try online.
- Agree as to what needs to happen in the advance technical check.

THE TEAM AT THE OULU UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES

- **Airi Tokola**, teacher, Principal Lecturer of Voice
 - Airi has been EVTA councillor and participant together with a student of hers a previous vocal pedagogy session, so we were professionally well acquainted. The fact that she had already seen me teach and I had made acquaintance with her and her student, made the co-operation between us as teachers feel very comfortable. In addition, the previous experience with online teaching both she and her students have had in the international two-year project at the Oulu University of Applied Sciences, was helpful in defining some of the things important for me to be aware of.
- **Mikko Heininen**, Senior Lecturer in Piano; a competent, supporting musician
- **Pasi Tyybäkinoja**, the technician
- **Maria Mannermaa**, mature spinto/jugendlich-dramatisch soprano
 - **Elsa's Traum – Lohengrin – R. Wagner**
 - **Initial contact:**
 - **Tell me about yourself and singing:**

- Maria is currently complementing her earlier conservatory-level diploma with preparations for the higher university exam. She is also working at a full-time job and has a family.
 - **What is your goal in studying singing?**
 - Maria has now “found all of her voice” and she wants to see how far she can go with singing. Being professional would be nice!
 - **Are there any questions you would like answered?**
 - She recently moved from the lyric to the spinto Fach and would like confirmation as to whether Elsa is the right repertoire for her.
 - **When something goes wrong, what is it that creates the problem?**
 - The answer was quick and clear: breathing is a problem, especially following a serious lung infection roughly a year ago.
 - **Why do you wish to sing this piece? What would you like to work on?**
 - The aria that opened a new world, I think it is a good aria for me but my vibrato is too wide and too slow, and I think it is connected to my breathing.
 - **Suppose something goes wrong when you are singing: What usually goes wrong? What do you do to correct it?**
 - I concentrate on breathing. I am an emotional singer, don’t let little stuff destroy the bigger picture.
 - How I sing depends a lot on how I feel – need more stability.
 - **What would you like to work on?** Breathing
- **Jaakko Kuusela (30) bass**
 - **The Vagabond – Songs of Travel – Ralph Vaughan Williams**
 - **Initial contact**
 - **Tell me about yourself and your singing.**
 - Jaakko is a student at the University of Applied Sciences in Oulu, voice major and is nearing graduation. After graduation in Oulu, he plans further study. He took German at university, and is interested in linguistics.
 - **What is your goal in studying singing?**
 - Jaakko wants to know if he will be able to sing professionally. He has already enjoyed singing a number of small roles.
 - He said, “Singing is interesting to me because it is a life-long journey. It calms me to know that it will never be done.”
 - **When singing and something goes wrong, what does it tend to be?**
 - Jaakko described a problem with concentration in performing, which hinders his ability to express himself. I asked him to try to define the moment he loses connection and the reasons for losing. He couldn’t answer but promised to think about it. His strategy for dealing with the problem is to “kick himself”.
 - **Why do you wish to sing this piece?**
 - I feel an identity with it.
 - Sung in A^b - key was chosen because it felt comfortable.
 - Starting to find the feeling – should be coming more from inside of me, from my soul.
 - **Suppose something goes wrong, what is it that creates the problem?**
 - Jaakko told me that he loses concentration, gets distracted – often somewhere near the beginning of a performance and it hinders his ability to express himself. He “gives himself a kick” to get out of it. Asked if he knows what causes it, he said, “Nervousness.” I suggested several things to think about and test at future performances.
 - **What would you like to work on?**
 - Jaakko’s wish was to work on concentration, and I hoped to be able to work on the colour and rhythm of the language since I felt it was too heavy and the colour of the voice, too dark.

Spectrograms: Although neither teacher nor students had prior experience with the use of visualization using spectrographic software in lessons, they willingly downloaded a free version on two computers and experimented with it.

In addition the conversation was followed by an e-mail exchange with some further information. I sent Jaakko the text of the song in the original poetry form, asking him to have it at hand for the lesson.

TECHNICAL CHECK AND GET-ACQUAINTED LESSON

- *Questions to ask:*
 - *Connection: Is the connection reliable without cutting out? Does the equipment work as it should?*
 - *Camera and video transmission*
 - *Is the camera positioned so everyone sees what they need to see?*
 - *How good is the quality of the picture?*
 - *Does one or both of the parties need to be careful of too much movement?*
 - *Microphone and sound transmission*
 - *Constant distance from the camera and microphone possible?*
 - *What changes if the student moves?*
 - *Is the sound quality good?*
 - *How much delay is there?*
 - *Is there an online echo?*
 - *What are the acoustics of each room like?*
 - *Spectrogram - If planning to use the spectrogram, does the student have a good view? Can the display be placed so the screen can be seen?*
 - *Do a short trial lesson without accompanist so we don't waste precious time getting to know each other during the demonstration.*

The technical check between the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki and the University of Applied Sciences in Oulu, Finland took place two days before the actual online lesson. It took some patience until the connection was established. Various settings and combinations of displays were tested. The transmission was not optimal when the students sang their pieces for me. There was considerable delay and irregular transmission, so it was necessary for a short time, to rely only on the sound. Nonetheless it was sufficient to talk briefly about their performances, to agree on the content of the upcoming lesson and to give the soprano one exercise to prepare the work on breathing planned for the lesson.

The Oulu team had successfully downloaded the software and experimented with it. The display with spectrograms on the two computer screens was also tested and the programme set up so the displays were similar. The first computer in Oulu had some disturbance, but the second one produced a clear image. Together we looked at the parameter I expected to use in the lesson and gave Maria an exercise to practise: 3 or 4 short exhalations and one long one on the unvoiced consonant "sh" with a clean onset and offset.

They also told me a little about their previous experience with online lessons, mentioning that it is important for me to look at the camera instead of at the screen.

THE ONLINE LESSON

After both students had sung their pieces, I began the teaching with Maria.

- **Maria** – Elsa's Dream – Lohengrin – R. Wagner
 - First of all, I assured her, that the spinto Fach and this piece indeed seems to be the right repertoire for her.

Maria was able to translate my suggestions into a more secure performance. She had worked on the breathing exercise, so we began by working with the spectrogram, looking for even energy in the exhalation. She was able to do this successfully, so I could proceed quickly to an application to the piece: extending the exhalation and breathing just as she would when singing the piece. After some corrections, she sang a longer passage of her piece with clearer, more secure tone. Her analysis was, that it had become easier. Conducting, a favourite device of mine when teaching, did not work since the delay was irritating. As a second step, I corrected some vowel colours that I felt were too dark. This too helped the clarity and ease of tone.

- **Jaakko – The Vagabond – Songs of Travel – Ralph Vaughn Williams**
 - Jaakko was obviously very nervous and detached from his expressivity when singing his piece, so I decided to try to reach the technical and concentration questions by an indirect route. As a first step, he agreed to begin the lesson by reading the text of the song as a poem. He was well prepared, and knew the translation of an unusual old-English word, reading fluently and with a good sense of expression. I asked him to sing the first verse of the song as close to speech feeling as possible. This resulted in a lighter, faster and easier performance. However, his inflection was then more noticeably affected by his mother tongue, so I suggested he try making it more like Italian, thinking open syllables (consonant-vowel) and maintaining long vowels. His sense of humour began to emerge as I referred to *Vaccai #1*, a vocal exercise familiar to any classical singer. In a third step towards achieving a better emotional connection, I asked him to read the third and fourth verses line by line in his own Finnish translation followed by the original English text. For a final version, we looked at the tempo marking: *Allegro moderato* with an *Animando* for the third verse. We set the tempo by taking the tempo of the text as he read and I suggested to the accompanist that he not give in to rubato or hints of slowing down. Not only Jaakko was happy with the result at the end of the lesson.

POST-LESSON ANALYSIS

- **General observations:**
 - Thanks to the excellent teleconferencing equipment, I was nearly able to forget that I was teaching via Internet, which was my highest goal in terms of the technology. The high-quality equipment was an important factor, since the transmission went much more smoothly than I expected.
 - I did have difficulty with communication through the camera, part of the problem being that my camera was mounted relatively high on the opposite wall. I had a monitor, which I looked at much of the time, although I found myself also looking at the large audience screen a lot as well. It would have been easier for me had the camera been mounted directly above a slightly larger monitor so that I could look at my camera and simultaneously have the students directly in my field of vision.
 - Delay was an issue despite the high-quality equipment. It took a little while to get into a rhythm of communication.
 - Practical things like having the same editions and bar numbers in the music become important to efficient communication.
- **How does the teaching change?**
 - The obvious change is that there is no direct physical contact. This wasn't an issue in the lesson with Jaakko. Work on breathing with Maria, could have been extended, but some of the ideas I offered her needed more explanation and time than we had available, so I didn't pursue them. I felt it better to give her several ideas to work on, rather than spend the time on one aspect.
 - Having no direct contact with the student requires very precise language and a clear goal. I feel that the preparation on both sides was worth the effort in establishing our vocabulary and communication.
 - The preparation also served the purpose of finding things the students could use by themselves.
 - The medium requires a calm atmosphere and is not as flexible as a normal lesson, making it important to set priorities and have a logical plan focussing on a few aspects.
 - I believe the new medium also contributed to the awareness and concentration of all participants. This effect would of course decrease with familiarity with the medium.
 - I caught myself thinking of interrupting the student while teaching. How do I signal the student that I wish him to stop before the end of the phrase or song verse?
- **How did the teacher-student relationship feel?**
 - The relationship felt comfortable but I was very glad I had gone to the effort of

- getting to know the students and preparing myself thoroughly, thinking through what might be appropriate for their learning and easy and clear to communicate.
- I felt able to establish an open and relaxed relationship with the students. It was initially helpful, that their teacher and I are well acquainted with each other. The fact that the medium was familiar to them probably also helped dispel a sense of distance. Their eagerness to learn and the excellent preparation for the lesson on their part were also factors contributing to an effective lesson. The request at the end of the session as to whether another lesson might be available through another venue indicated that they also felt comfortable a similar feel to the relationship from their side.
 - **Which purposes could this kind of teaching serve?**
 - For a public master class such as this one: high-level technical equipment and a competent technician are essential. If the technology doesn't work, it kills the project. Also essential is prior contact and knowledge of the students and their questions, agreeing what to work on.
 - For teacher consultation: this could be useful for consulting a teacher when a student has a specific problem to deal with, a question regarding audition repertoire, or some other issue requiring consultation.
 - It could be especially worthwhile as an investment for teachers/students in a more remote setting since it definitely offers more flexible possibilities or individualized master classes for example than bringing in guest teachers in person or sending students abroad.
 - What can be taught effectively, what not:
 - General uses
 - Contact with own students: check-ups, advice at an audition or competition, etc.
 - Consultation of all kinds
 - Initial contact to be followed up in person
 - As a rule, it will NOT replace person-to-person contact for regular teaching, basic technical training. We need our ears and the direct relationship.
 - Via a well-functioning Skype connection:
 - Questions of language and diction
 - Musical and stylistic questions such as tempo, rhythm, melodic line, dynamics, accents, breathing problems associated with the music
 - Extreme vocal ranges, especially the high female voice will not be transmitted well, dynamics are limited.
 - Given enough laptops, fine points of sound quality could be worked on using spectograms on both sides and screen sharing.
 - Master classes with advanced students using high-end equipment are an exciting possibility to access teachers not available to travel to many locations to teach.

Report and comments by the students

Jaakko wrote: *It is difficult to get the feeling of performance in a simple classroom singing to a camera mounted on the wall, but basically this is a good way to study with guest professors, when dealing with a prior prepared program. It was nice to get new perspectives and ideas for the future.*

Performing for camera was naturally not the same as singing live on stage because the connection to the audience was missing. As a result, my nervousness about the performance did not occur as it does live on stage. But it is very nice for a student not to have to travel all around the world and spend all possible money on it and still get good coaching of guest professors.

