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Master Class Syndrome

Lynn Holding



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SINGERS AND TEACHERS OF SINGING are engaged in an ongoing, mutual quest for beautiful, expressive singing performed with ease. Even though many resources are devoted to building better teachers (workshops, pedagogy degrees, and this journal), the basic truth is, the success of this venture depends less upon the valuable knowledge or rich professional experience of the teacher, and more upon the ability of the student to grasp what the teacher imparts. I have stated before that this simple fact, illuminated by recent research in cognitive science, has engendered a paradigm shift in pedagogic emphasis from how well teachers teach, to how well students learn.¹ Or, as Deborah Loewenberg Ball, Dean of the University of Michigan School of Education stated in a *New York Times* article, “Teaching depends on what other people think, not what you [the teacher] think.”²

Since this is so, the question “how” inevitably springs up in any serious discussion regarding improving the delivery system of knowledge from teacher to learner. How do teachers construct their lessons so that the student absorbs what is taught? Are there steps that learners could take in order to maximize their receptiveness to what the teacher has to offer? Before the question how can be entertained, it is necessary to consider learning itself. A perusal of the subject “learning,” including a search for a simple definition, yields a complex subject in a continual state of flux. Many standard psychology texts in current circulation support a definition of learning identical or similar to this: “Learning is a process that results in a permanent change in behavior as a result of experience.”³ Often these definitions include modifiers, such as “relatively permanent change,” or synonyms such as “practice” for “experience.” This common definition has been labeled unsatisfactory for a number of reasons, including the necessity of distinguishing “learning as a process from the behavioral results or the products of that process.”⁴ One psychologist drily noted that “learning does not necessarily produce a change in behavior,” to which any voice teacher saddled with an unresponsive student can attest.⁵

My preferred definition of learning is more of an explanation, from research psychologist Gary Marcus.

Regardless of which species we talk about, or which aspect of mental life we investigate, the ability to learn starts with the ability to remember. An organism can learn from experience only if it can rewire its nervous system in a lasting way; there can be no learning without memory⁶

This elegant definition cuts to the core of a complex subject by highlighting an underlying tenet of learning theory, namely, that the learner cannot be

said to have learned a thing if it cannot be repeated. Stated differently, that a thing is truly learned is evidenced by its repeatability, which is a feat of memory whether of the intellect (like a math formula) or the body (like a dance step). At the critical juncture of memory and repeatability, learning is no longer a process, but a *fait accompli*.

LEARNING/HAVE LEARNED

Regardless of whether one is situated as a teacher or a student in the learning constellation (and performance art usually requires a lifetime commitment to both), it is critical to distinguish the learning process from the learning product. The act of learning is dynamic, but its product (for example, a performance task), if truly learned, is placed in the past tense, and hence is both repeatable and observable. Further, the distinction between learning and performance must be considered. Learning is a dynamic process by which one acquires skill or knowledge, but performance refers to the manner or effectiveness with which that skill or knowledge is implemented by the doer.

All of these definitions may seem quite rudimentary until considered anew in light of recent discoveries in cognitive science, and placed within the context of that paragon of voice orthodoxy: the master class.

THE MASTER CLASS

The standard set-up for a master class is this: a master teacher is brought in to teach a handful of singers while a larger cohort of auditors observes. The master is distinguished by a résumé of accomplishment as a singer, teacher, coach, or some combination of those professions. In a school of music or similar educational setting, performers and auditors may expect to participate as part of their tuition. In nonacademic settings, both performers and auditors alike may expect to pay for the privilege, and if the master teacher is suitably famous or well connected, this fee may be substantial. Potential participants who perform a cost-benefit analysis and decide to pay the required fee likely reason that the price is worth the master's valuable knowledge. This surely must be the reasoning behind auditors' willingness to pay, even though they relinquish the privilege of actually singing for the master. Those who actually perform in class

are not infrequently motivated by other rewards besides mere learning; these fringe benefits include the addition of the master class line item to one's résumé, the potential for future networking with the master teacher, and the opportunity simply to be heard by the master and others in attendance. Many master classes as well as vocal competitions are open to the public. Audiences include friends, family, and the merely curious, but may also attract music critics, agents, and other artists' representatives. Anthony Tommasini, music critic for the *New York Times*, described the audience attraction to high profile master classes and competitions alike in a review of this year's Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions.

For the voice buffs in the audience, it is always fascinating to hear the young finalists and try to sort out, along with the panel of judges, who among them will be the stars of tomorrow.⁷

Given their potential for pure exposure and networking, it is no wonder that master classes and competitions are such ubiquitous events in the lives of all performers, and at all stages of development: young student, budding novice, and working professional. As stated in a report of a recent master class given by Renée Fleming, "many fans would likely agree" that the master class had been worthwhile.

She was just inspirational. She was firm, she was critical, but she had a sense of humor, she was witty, and I'm sure we all—students and audience—learned a great deal.⁸

But what do participants actually learn from the master class experience? The answers, as seen through the lens of cognitive science, may be surprising or even unsettling. However, engaging the experience with eyes wide open allows singers to reap the full benefits of the master class experience, which often includes jettisoning directives that were at best ineffective and at worst destructive. Besides, the current teachers of such students are often left to guide them through the master class fallout. It is for these reasons that master teachers often wisely begin their sessions with caveats like these:

I always start with a disclaimer and say if you don't agree, or if you and your teacher don't agree, just, please, discard it immediately.⁹

EXPOSURE VERSUS LEARNING

To begin, let us address the main attribute most participants list as the prize for participation: the master teacher's valuable knowledge. While a worthy goal, is it a realistic one? When we recall that the hallmark of true learning (especially in the motor learning sense) is repeatability, the simple answer is, exposure does not equal learning. It is common for a singer in a master class to execute a novel vocal task on demand quite well, even to the point of amazement by the auditors and the singer himself. It is quite another feat to be able to replicate the technique on one's own. This statement by voice teacher Bruce Lunkley rings true to both teachers and singers:

Should something spectacular happen during a practice, I give [my students] permission to come right away, knock on my door, and tell me about it. I want to hear about it right away, not next week when they can't do it anymore!¹⁰

While this anecdote refers to self-discovery through practice, the phenomenon of singular success is also common in the one-time setting that is master class, in which the master is able to elicit a dramatically improved response from the singer on display.

"Support," that mysterious connection between breath and sound, is "the most controversial aspect of singing," said Fleming. She had the young soprano lean the front of her body against the grand piano and sing again. And whether [the soprano] was just more relaxed because she had the piano to hold her up, or because the resistance reminded her to breathe more effectively, Fleming was enthusiastic about the results. "It's more open," she said. "You've got more substance to your voice."¹¹

If this young soprano were able to replicate this lower breathing technique on her own the next day and ever after, then brava! But if not, her new breathing technique cannot be said to have been learned. As if in acknowledgement that actually learning new techniques takes time and practice, Fleming added, "I was wearing an elastic belt for a while."¹²

Exposure is not learning, but it is the necessary first step in the learning process. What follows must be practice and habituation, until a gesture (in this case, breathing technique) is learned—with or without the use of physical props, a subject to which I will return in a future column.

While the master class experience for this young soprano may have been vocally or even spiritually significant, by our working definition of learning that hinges on repeatability, real learning cannot be said to have occurred if it cannot be replicated. So what's a singer to do? By all means, I would suggest following the example of two young men recently overheard at a Juilliard master class given by Renée Fleming:

[A]s I left the Master Class, I listened to a pair of male students talking up a storm about the class and how they couldn't wait to get home to start practicing what they'd learned!¹³

Recent research in cognitive science suggests that the sensory memory lodged in the performer's brain may be strong enough to rekindle itself so as to become truly learned—with enough practice over time. And more intriguing still, the recent discovery of *mirror neurons* in the brain suggests that even those who were not master class performers, but auditors like these two male Juilliard students may be able to summon the necessary sensory cues, provided they have reached a certain level of accomplishment.¹⁴

The study of music within the larger field of cognitive science is only about a decade old, yet research in the field has expanded rapidly and yielded results that, frankly, may not be all that surprising to seasoned musicians, especially the "ubiquitous benefit of musical training."¹⁵

Musicians have been shown to outperform nonmusicians on a variety of tasks, ranging from language to mathematics . . . We now know that the musician's brain has functional adaptations for processing pitch and timbre as well as structural specializations in auditory, visual, motor, and cerebellar regions of the brain. Some studies also suggest that the interplay between [these] modalities is stronger in musicians [than nonmusicians].¹⁶

In other words, musicians are probably better (and faster) at processing the fundamentals of music like pitch and timbre and, via their superior sensory systems, the motor memory responsible for improving technique. The message is, run, don't walk, to the practice room as soon as possible after the master class experience. Presupposing the experience was a beneficial one, an immediate follow-up will maximize the investment by morphing the "one-and-done" miracle into a learned and therefore repeatable technique.

THE DARK SIDE OF EXPOSURE

Teaching a master class is like taking apart an intricate clock—in public. Moreover, the master must put that clock back together and, if she is worth her salt, not only in good condition, but one hopes in slightly better working order than it was presented, albeit twenty minutes earlier. And finally, singers are neither clocks nor machines, but human beings, striving performing artists who allow vulnerability in this very public forum. What if, in the twenty-minute dissection of singer and voice known as “master class,” something goes awry and cannot be put together again? It is worth a look at the dark side of exposure.

Ms. Cook wanted to know “why on earth” [Singer X] chose [that particular song]. Ms. Cook asserted that the song did not suit the format of the class because it lacked emotional depth. (Prior to the class, she had asked students to choose music that had deep emotional meaning for them.) [Singer X’s] response was courageously candid: To her, the song was about feeling “out of place with a situation.” She admitted to feeling a strong connection to it because “I feel out of place,” having never sung musical theater before . . . Ms. Cook stopped her and requested that she “try to not to be concerned with sound.” Ms. Cook’s idea of a natural style of delivery proved difficult for a classically trained singer, for whom naturalness has other connotations, to achieve on the spot. Both teacher and student were clearly frustrated. [Singer X] left the stage, momentarily overcome with emotion.¹⁷

Let us examine the signal moment of this report: “Both teacher and student were clearly frustrated.” The writer of this article does not report if any techniques were suggested by Ms. Cook for Singer X to try, but any reader of this account would surely understand that a frustration level great enough to cause a singer to leave the stage in a public forum had to be fairly significant (especially considering all those master class fringe benefits that were likely forfeited upon Singer X’s departure).

Even though the reporter attempted to redeem this tale by concluding, “She composed herself and returned to give a searing performance,”¹⁸ the reader cannot help but feel mixed emotions: empathy for the student singer, or perhaps empathy for the master teacher if the student was truculent or simply ill prepared. Unless one was actually present, it is impossible to know. But the basic elements of this story can illuminate an important component of motor learning research called *Performance Shifts*.

PERFORMANCE SHIFTS

As we all know, many different physical and emotional states can affect performance, both positively and negatively. While singers all hanker after positive performance, negative performance shifts can often signal destabilization of ingrained vocal habits. If you are a teacher, the destabilization you observe in your student may be the harbinger of the great strides in technique that you have been working toward. If you are a singer, however, this awkward adjustment period can be quite unnerving. No matter whether you rejoice or weep, it appears that learning entails temporary performance decrements that act like cognitive bulldozers, knocking down the mental structure until a new and presumably better habit fills the void. In the interim, the learner may feel as if he is learning to walk all over again, a comparison that is not too far-fetched, since the vocal habit being destabilized may feel as natural as walking, even if it is inefficient or harmful.

Since the teacher was the architect of the cognitive bulldozing in the first place, it is the teacher’s responsibility to guide the student through this awkward phase. This job becomes more challenging when guiding students through a learning decrement that happened outside the studio (a summer festival experience, for example), and can be doubly so when the decrement occurred in a public master class. To return to the clock analogy, it is as if the clock was left out on the workbench, parts spilled, and now it is the task of the studio teacher to come along behind and patiently put it all back together again. Exactly how the teacher manages this with both skill and tact is a conundrum, especially given the many parameters involved: the student’s psychological state, technical ability, maturity level, and persistence, to name a few. What the student brings to the process is just as critical. However, let us return to the main topic of concern in this article: learning.

LEARNING

The dark side of exposure are learning decrements—*performance shifts*—which are unnerving in their ability to shake us to the core. In a twist on the old adage “its always darkest before the dawn,” here is the good news straight from the front of cognitive research: Your bad experience may be your best. Even though the cog-

nitive bulldozing leaves behind a mess, the clean-up process is where the building (learning) happens. Everything (poor habits, ineffective thinking) will be brought to light (exposed!) and shaken, but in the process, also divested of some cobwebs. When dusty habits are objectively examined in full light, they often reveal themselves to be useless—and are discarded. Thus a disquieting void is created. Riding out this empty period while working toward the gain can be difficult. In cognitive terms, working through the learning decrement phase (or “temporary negative performance shift”) until a new structure (technique) can be built, is hard work for both learner and teacher. When this going gets rough, it can be helpful for both learner and teacher to know that, according to research in motor learning, measures that enhance temporary performance actually depress real learning.¹⁹ In nonscientific terms, the things that teachers do for their students when motivated by sympathy (i.e., empty praise) or that students accept, motivated by a temporary bout of self-doubt, are simply feel-good moves. While these measures may temporarily buoy flagging confidence and cause a positive temporary performance shift, they are not benign. By constructing or accepting false supports, we withhold the shakedown, thereby stifling learning within our students or within ourselves.

WORTH THE PRICE OF ADMISSION?

So, is the master class a worthwhile experience? If the prime motivation going in is gaining valuable knowledge, if knowledge was indeed gained, it may be apparent only in retrospect and after some time has passed, allowing the clutter to have been swept away. A second possibility is that only the precursor of knowledge, exposure, was gained; but exposure in itself can be well worth the price of admission.

Finally, if nothing but an internal shakedown was the result of the master class experience, one may well wonder: was it worth the price of admission? My opinion is this: consider the shakedown a free fringe benefit. You may be the richer for it—at least as far as true learning is concerned.

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Lynn Holding

Guided by her rubric “Connecting Voice Science to Vocal Art,” mezzo soprano **Lynn Holding** pursues a dynamic career made up of diverse yet interrelated paths.

She has sung leading roles with the Harrisburg, Nashville, Ohio Light, and Tennessee Opera Theatres, and has appeared in recital throughout the United States, Italy, England, France, Germany, Spain, and Australia, where she served as Artist-in-Residence at Melbourne’s LaTrobe University. She has given concerts in such varied venues as the home of Garcia Lorca in Granada, Spain, the famed Icelandic spa *The Blue Lagoon*, and the official residence of the president of Iceland, where her performances were broadcast on Icelandic National Radio.

To further her knowledge as a singing voice specialist, she studied vocalogy with Dr. Ingo Titze, Dr. Katherine Verdolini, and other voice science professionals over two summers at the Summer Vocology Institute, National Center for Voice and Speech in Denver, Colorado, and earned her Master’s Degree in Vocal Pedagogy from Westminster Choir College of Rider University. That same year, she was awarded the 2005 Van Lawrence Fellowship, given jointly by the Voice Foundation and NATS Foundation to

recognize excellence in teaching and to support further research in the science of the singing voice.

Her lecture series “Connecting Voice Science to Vocal Art” illuminates ongoing research in cognitive science, a field which she believes augurs profound implications for the future of enlightened voice pedagogy, and ushers in a paradigm shift in emphasis from how well teachers teach, to how well students learn.

Holding studied vocal performance at the University of Montana with Esther England, in Vienna with Kammersänger Otto Edelmann, and at Indiana University, where she was the first singer ever accepted to pursue the Artist Diploma, completed under the tutelage of Dale Moore. She served four years as a member of the voice faculty at Vanderbilt University, and is currently Associate Professor of Voice and Director of Performance Studies at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

She welcomes communication at: holding@dickinson.edu and invites visitors to her website: <http://users.dickinson.edu/~holding>.



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