

## ON THE VALUE AND METHOD OF PRACTICE

The main thing to remember about practice is that the more frequent and regular, the more effective it is. This of course assumes that the practice is conscious and thoughtful. (I remember a neighbor some years ago who did the same practice every day. I could hear plainly through the floor her relentless, heartless repetition of the same rigid routine. I saw her perform once. Relentless, heartless... I don't mean that kind of practice!)

I am used to warming up most singers by going directly to light head voice sounds and bringing them down through the middle of the voice, in a kind of a light stretching. However, a recent article on stretching before exercise in the "Science Times" section of the *New York Times* (Tuesday, 4/27) and the follow-up "letters to the editor" a week later (5/4) have given me a new insight. The upshot was that stretching before exercise isn't always enough to prevent sports injury. Their conclusion was that vigorous exercise—such as full out singing—should be preceded by aerobic warming (getting blood to flow in the muscles), then by the athletic activity itself, *then* by stretching to allow the muscles that have been contracted through exertion to stretch out again.

I have been experimenting with starting practice sessions with short, light scales in the lower part of the voice, growing in intensity, followed by stretching downward from the high register, until the voice feels ready for singing.

**Cooling down** is an important last stage. When singers have been singing full out, especially if they feel vocally tired afterwards, or if they have been doing heavy chest voice singing, it is a very good idea to finish with some light stretching exercises. This need not take more than a minute or two, but it is very important after strenuous singing. I can often tell when a student has had a heavy performance the evening before, because the voice will be stiff and resistant. I always take those opportunities to talk to them about cooling down.

## STUDENTS OUT AND ABOUT

When **Nicole Tieri** began studying with me this past October through the Tisch School at New York University, she had just made the first cut as a contestant on the *American Idol* television show and was on her way to Pasadena to compete in the final rounds. Her life was essentially on hold from then through mid-March, while she waited to find out whether or not she would be continuing with the competition. Although the judges did not select her for the final cut (don't ask me my opinion about the integrity of this bottom-of-the-barrel television phenomenon) she still remains tremendously popular, since much of America fondly remembers her "scooter girl" persona.

**Amanda Goodridge** is touring with Theatre-Works USA in their production of *Corduroy* for young audiences. I thoroughly enjoyed sitting in the midst of a large audience of enthralled children and their parent chaperones at a recent performance at New York's Equitable Center.

Tenor **Ryan Pierce** understudied the role of one of the younger brothers in last spring's production of Jake Hegge's *Dead Man Walking* at New York City Opera. Ryan never got to go on, which was a pity, because as I watched this really thrilling piece of theatre I kept thinking how wonderful his very special quality would have illuminated the role.

**Peggy Papp**, who sings in my community chorus, studies the speaking voice with me. She is a renowned family psychologist, and has just returned from lecturing in Havana, Cuba for the Pan-American Association for Mental Health in Adolescents and Children.

Soprano **Roseanne Benjamin** will be leaving the city in June to shoot a movie in Los Angeles. In the meantime, she is a tremendous help to the soprano section in my community chorus.

## SINGING WITH MEDICAL DISABILITIES

Several singers have come to my studio over the last couple of years who have struggled with vocal maladies and other medical liabilities. Although I'm not specifically trained to deal with these issues, my internship a couple of years ago at the Grabscheid Voice Center at Mt. Sinai Medical Center did teach me to be alert to possible medical conditions in my students. Over a period of eight weeks I observed Dr. Peak Woo and his team of therapists—Linda Carroll, Rosemary Ostrowski, and Jackie Mojica—diagnose and treat numerous difficulties. That experience really sharpened my ears to listen more perceptively for healthy voice function.

A not so common condition that showed up recently in my studio is **vocal sulcus**—or in this case sulci, since there were two, one on each vocal fold. A sulcus is a scarring groove parallel to the length of the vocal fold that goes right down through the mucus layer to the muscle. It is usually thought to be congenital, but there is still a lot of research to be done on this pathology. At any rate, when a college student showed up last fall in my studio with a chronically rough sound, by the second lesson I was urging her to consult a throat doctor. I didn't like what I was hearing. Due to hassles with her insurance company (don't ask), it took five months before she finally saw a doctor. Meanwhile, progress with her training was slow because I was overly cautious about using too aggressive an approach. Her vocal difficulties were baffling. She had plenty of range, although the middle was breathy and unstable (not usually a difficult problem to fix). More perplexing was her inability to sustain a tone in any

part of her voice. I was pretty sure I wasn't hearing nodule or polyp interference, but thought perhaps she had nerve damage. When the diagnosis of sulcus finally came back, everything made sense. I had observed the staff at the Grabscheid Center work with sulcus patients, and I immediately had a clearer idea how to work with my student.

Even more mysterious has been my experience with singers with **chrone's disease**. After the second student showed up in the studio with this condition, I consulted a couple of speech therapist/voice teacher colleagues to get some support about working with them. My colleagues were amazed that this condition would appear in my studio twice. I won't try to describe chrone's disease accurately, but it attacks the auto-immune system, and among other things its victims' gastrointestinal systems can make their lives hell. One student, a very talented belter, was affected in the upper GI. The other, who had a gorgeous baritone voice, had constant distress in the lower GI. Enough said! Other common occurrences were chronic fatigue and flu-like symptoms, including sore throat. The belter, who was also recovering from an operation for vocal nodules when she came to me, was a particularly difficult case. Her voice was raspy, with a very short top range, and she easily became vocally fatigued and sore. After about a year and a half of work, the voice stabilized, and what's more important, she became more self-directed and positive about her life and career. With discipline, she managed to turn her vocal condition around, and is now belting again and performing regularly—and very beautifully I might add.

The main point I want to make is that it is very useful for me to know right from the start about any medical condition you may have. I may not know everything about how to proceed with your training, but I can get you to qualified professionals who will treat you and can probably guide me how best to work with you. This year alone, students have confided that they are taking medication for **depression** or for **attention deficit disorder**, or that they have been treated for **bulimia**. In every case, it confirmed learning patterns I had seen in their work, but more importantly, it helped me to have patience and to be extra supportive of their process.

#### TENTH ANNIVERSARY FOR MY CHORUS

**The Holy Apostles Community Chorus**, which I founded in November 1994, is now heading into its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary season. For our anniversary concert next December we plan to hire a baroque orchestra to accompany our performance of Marc-Antoine Charpentier's 1700 *Messe de Minuit pour Noël* which we have been preparing in increments over the last two years. In a cheerful nod (and hopefully send-off) to President Bush I plan to give the entire concert a French theme. An anniversary committee has formed to help plan our celebration. I am shopping for French synagogue music, and music from the French-speaking Arabic countries to

balance our program. We'll need much bigger funding than usual, so I will be calling on Air France and other similar companies over the next few months!

Meanwhile, we have a great concert coming up this spring entitled **By the Rivers of Babylon: Music of the Jewish and African Diasporas (and Music on African Themes by Jewish Composers of the American Songbook)**. Some of the items we will sing are a chant on the words of the concert's title (from Psalm 137) by 16<sup>th</sup> century Venetian composer Salomone Rossi, as well as the reggae "national anthem" *By the Rivers of Babylon* (as sung by the Melodians). We'll also sing a rag by Scott Joplin, and Otis Reading's great R&B anthem (and Aretha Franklin's hit) *Respect*. Our guest is Tiffany Jackson, a gorgeous soprano from the Houston Grand Opera. She'll sing scenes from Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* with us. The concert is on Saturday, June 12 at 4:00 p.m. at the Church of the Holy Apostles on Ninth Avenue at 28<sup>th</sup> Street. Admission is free, with a suggested \$10 donation.

#### ON THE SINGING OF SONGS

Recently I attended a wonderful event sponsored by the New York Singing Teachers' Association. As a member of their art song competition committee I helped produce a contest for art song singers, and the subsequent awards concert, which was held on May 1 at the lovely Milbank Chapel of Teachers' College, Columbia University. It's not easy to produce a competition and not be able to take part in the selection of the winners. Two of my favorite contestants were in the finals but not among the winners. Nevertheless, I was thrilled by the overall high level of the young people I heard sing. (There was no upper age limit for the contest, but I believe all the contestants were in their twenties.) I will also say that the first place winner, tenor Matthew Garrett (I only wish he were my student) completely deserved the prize. He is not only a fine vocalist, but his concentrated involvement with the text and his ability to communicate it with theatricality and at the same time a certain selfless truthfulness, was superb. It was the same whether he sang in English or Russian. This is what good singing is all about. It is why I get excited about song singing more than any other musical form. I have attended many fine opera performances, but my favorite memories are of the simple recitals I've seen with just a singer and pianist on stage. The same goes for the great Broadway musicals I've seen. Wonderful as they are, I don't feel that they can top the high drama of a good cabaret performance.

This contest was funded largely by my friend and teacher colleague Nancy Adams, in memory of her husband David, who died a little over a year ago. At that time I was observing several master teachers of my choosing as a requirement for completing a course in pedagogy, and I had the honor of watching David and Nancy team teach in their studio just before the final months David's fight with cancer.