The Singer's Library

Everything Old Is New Again

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH

The vocal pedagogues of the past crafted tremendous singers and techniques for many generations. A new publication includes some of their written works and deserves the attention of the 21st century.

Author Stephen F. Austin likes old things. He lives in an old neighborhood in an old house that is filled with antiques. In his own words, he is fascinated by things "that have a story attached to them."

This interest, however, is not limited to houses and heirlooms. From 2004 to 2016, Austin wrote a column for the *Journal of Singing* (the official journal of the National Association of Teachers of Singing) entitled Provenance. The purpose of the column was to present lengthy excerpts from voice treatises, books, and other pedagogical resources from decades—and sometimes centuries—past. As Austin highlighted in the column, many of the articles hold up remarkably well over time, even when scrutinized by modern eyes.

Now, the more than 50 articles have been collected and published by Inside View Press in one volume called *Provenance: Historic Voice Pedagogy Viewed through a Contemporary Lens*. In this interview, Austin discusses the importance of understanding the history of voice pedagogy and how it can still inform present-day voice instruction.

You write in the Introduction to *Provenance: Historic Voice Pedagogy Viewed through a Contemporary Lens* that voice teachers are among the few professionals who can practice without a thorough knowledge of the history of their craft. Can you explain what you mean by that?

Brian Manternach

Our knowledge of the craft of teaching may only go as deep as our own personal experience. We learn from our teachers, but rarely are we exposed to ideas outside of our own experience. This can be a rich background—or perhaps not. We learn about music by studying music history and theory from a historical perspective because it informs the way that we are able to think about and do music.

However, it is rare that we have any knowledge or awareness of the history of teaching voice. It is important because there are no new lessons, no new problems to be solved that haven't been addressed in the past by experienced and knowledgeable teachers who took the time to lay out a plan for addressing vocal growth and the correction of faults. Many new teachers begin their work with a blank slate and then are forced to re-create the wheel.

How do you suspect so many teachers can get by without a better understanding of the history of the craft?

I believe that there are naturally gifted teachers who are able to guide in a reflexive way. Their instincts are good, they have had good training of their own, they listen to great singing, and know what elite singing sounds like.

I would certainly put myself in this category as a young teacher many years ago. I was empathetic, my ears were well trained, and I was able to get pretty good results. As my awareness grew of the historical schools of teaching and the progressive methods that they developed, my teaching effectiveness increased by leaps and bounds! I think even those of us who do "get by" in our teaching can benefit from the legacy of Manuel García, the Lampertis, Marchesi, and many others.

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Some of the early sources you cite can easily be found on the shelves of university libraries or even online. But many others must have required some intensive digging to uncover. How did you come across some of the more obscure or hard-to-get materials?

Believe it or not, I found personal copies of many of the methods that I quote from online auctions, but I was made aware of them through other authors who pointed to them. Monahan's *The Art of Singing*, Fields' *Training the Singing Voice*, Coffin's *Historical* [*Vocal*] *Pedagogy Classics*, Reid's *Bel Canto* [*Principles and Practices*], Edward Foreman's works, and finally, James Stark's *Bel Canto* were all inspirations for digging deeper. I hope that the articles in *Provenance* will serve as a jumping-off point for further reading.

Can you give us an example of something advocated in these early writings that, based on modern understanding, we can more or less dismiss?

Fantastical ideas concerning the singing voice and its production abound in all ages. I think one of the great things that voice science does for us is to offer us the ability to discern truth from fantasy.

Book Review

In Stephen F. Austin's recurring column in the *Journal of Singing*, each issue printed the definition of the column's title, Provenance: "place of origin, source. [LAT. *Provenire*, to originate]." In the Introduction to Austin's book based on the same column, *Provenance: Historic Voice Pedagogy Viewed through a Contemporary Lens*, he shares a second definition: "a history, a connection to the past."

In making this connection to historic voice pedagogues by reprinting their writings, Austin reveals many ideas that foreshadowed current practices. For instance, while many recent methodologies have begun incorporating exercises designed to strengthen the chest voice (especially for CCM singing), similar exercises were promoted in historical treatises by Pier Francesco Tosi (1653-1732), Giambattista Mancini (1714-1800), and Manuel García II (1805-1906).

Similarly, as today's motor learning theories encourage shorter "distributed practice" sessions to avoid vocal fatigue, García was an early advocate of practice sessions of only 15–20 minutes with rest in between. And while *messa di voce* exercises are the golden standard for demonstrating vocal proficiency in many studios, Austin demonstrates that advocates for the practice extend at least as far back as 1774.

Austin does point out the idiosyncrasies of some early authors as well, referring to one as "a bit opinionated," another as "outspoken," and yet another as making "inflammatory" remarks—practices that, regrettably, still exist today among some pedagogues. Austin's commitment to including large sections of these original writings, however, allows readers to develop an accurate picture of each author's main points and a thorough understanding of the reasoning that led to those beliefs.

Of course, as Austin writes, there are too many contradictory opinions among these authors over this 300-year period for all ideas to be considered correct. And as a professor of voice with a PhD in voice science, he would be the first to recognize the functional and anatomical inaccuracies levied by some authors. But he also states that, while modern science can offer voice teachers and singers objective means of evaluation, any teaching method should ultimately be evaluated upon its effectiveness.

Austin believes that good teaching and good science support each other. As the 350 pages of *Provenance* reveal, many early teachers could develop practices that have stood the test of time, despite not having access to modern voice science. Austin writes, "When voice science confirms historical practice, it would appear worthy of consideration." By highlighting the precursors to contemporary voice pedagogy and establishing their historical lineage, *Provenance* provides the background that will give context to every other voice pedagogy text in a singer's library. As such, it too is worthy of consideration. —*Brian Manternach*

Every effective pedagogical idea does not have to be scientifically true to be helpful! However, if the method is too far off the path, it can lead to ineffectiveness or harm. When you distill the pedagogical truth from the 18th and 19th centuries (and much of the early 20th) you find threads of a common practice that may differ in the details but follow a predictable path. It is a progressive method and builds skill upon the previously attained skill over time (years, not weeks) to build a voice that is powerful, flexible, beautiful, and expressive.

In certain cases, you believe early pedagogical concepts have been misunderstood by modern pedagogues and not given fair consideration. For instance, you make several references to 19th century voice teacher Manuel García and his definition of the *coup de la glotte* or "stroke of the glottis." How has this idea gotten a bad reputation over the years?

The *coup de la glotte* has gotten bad press probably because of those who misunderstood it, misapplied it, and suffered for it. This happened during García's lifetime. Many things that we do as singers can be overemphasized and can lead a singer to a dead end or worse. In this instance, the reality is that no elite singer achieves success by aspirating their onsets.

The answer to the *coup de la glotte* as found in some form of the "imaginary onset," is exactly that—imaginary. I was taught that the *coup* was harmful, and so I taught the onset through the "imaginary H" after Vennard. When I was inspired to read García's own description of the *coup de la glotte* in James Stark's book, I had to reexamine my position.

I tried it with my students and with my own singing and realized that I had been missing out on a very important small detail

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in my teaching that resulted in tremendous growth when properly applied. I inherited my bias against it from my own teacher. I changed my mind when I read the original source. That is the inspiration for all the articles that make up this book.

Considering the lack of access to modern instruments of analysis, would you say that early pedagogues mostly got things right in their assessment or mostly got things wrong?

Well, the proof of the pudding is in the tasting. Good singing is exactly that. The art of Bel Canto developed before the modern era, relying only upon the sensitive ears and experience of the voice teacher. Their pedagogical practice was derived from years of experimentation in the studio. After generations of trial and error, a method was derived from best practice as observed in the great singers of the day.

It is my hope that we as modern voice teachers will dedicate as much energy and time to understanding the historical methods as we do trying to understand vocal tract acoustics. I am convinced the practical payoff will be much greater for our students.

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