

RECITALS: Making Mistakes

By John R. Stevenson, D.J-D

After all these years of teaching, the student recitals have never stopped to amaze me, and Saturday evening, the 7th of February, was no exception. It is heartwarming to hear the students perform so well after having helped them through each note, phrase, dynamic, rhythm, and articulation, and in the case of the singers each syllable of their pieces. It is good to hear that they have come to understand a piece of music literature as well as they may understand a poem, a sonnet, or even a novel. It is also good to realize that they can some day revisit these pieces of music literature, and that they will find yet something new, something never heard before in each one.

For me the real beauty is in the growth and progress of each individual student. Fortunately, as a seasoned musician-educator with 35 years of teaching and training musicians at all levels, I have gained the insight and understanding of how musicianship develops within the human being, how it is different for each individual, and in general how it will manifest itself at varying levels of development.

The students do not have the insight to see their progress. They just see the mistakes they make, just ask them. My task is not only to educate them at their instrument and voice, but also to remind them of where they began and how far they have come. However, students only want to discuss the mistakes, which are actually “slips” or the things they could or should have done better.

I never discuss the slips after a performance. If there are an excessive amount in a piece then the piece was simply not ready to perform, and that would be my fault not theirs. Slips are just that, slips. No one can go back and fix them, and regretting them is a waste of time. I often tell my students that Arthur Rubinstein, (1886-1982) a world-renowned pianist, made many mistakes in his performances and recordings. He would refuse to re-do a recording on the basis that the work of art he presented had flaws and that the flaws were a part of the whole performance. I recently heard a recording of a live performance of Rubinstein's on public radio where he skipped an entire section of a Chopin Polonaise. The commentator discussed it before playing the recording. I was amazed that Rubinstein was able to skip

the section, and yet convince me that he was correct. The audience cheered at the end all the same. Did they know? Did they care? His performance was so moving and so powerful that the slips simply did not matter.

Mistakes are always unfortunate and yet, always quickly forgotten by an audience. I try to speak to my students of what they did well, how they communicated and presented their pieces as a work of art, and how that has changed and developed since their last performance. Then I make a mental note of what they can do to improve their next performance and work with them toward that goal.

At the age of 19 or 20, a very inspired and inspiring teacher of mine, Dr. Joseph Wilcox Jenkins, a well-known composer of sacred choral music, once told me that when the Aztec Indians would create a perfect piece of pottery, they would purposefully create a flaw such as a chip or deep scratch somewhere on the piece. They understood, according to Dr. Jenkins, that perfection was for the gods, not human beings. His story, and I really do not know if it is true or not, made a change in my life, and has stayed with me ever since. Who are we to seek

perfection? We simply need to find the vehicle that will allow us to speak clearly about who we are and who we want to become. This vehicle may be a developed technical-musical skill such as singing and/or playing the piano. However, in order to speak well, we must see the difference between working at perfecting a skill and working to do it perfectly. Once we understand the difference, we can accept our flaws, let go of our expectations, and concentrate on working.

This is a difficult lesson for young musicians primarily because it does not make sense to them. They see that they can resolve the math problem perfectly, execute the science experiment perfectly, and read an entire text and answer the questions perfectly. Perfection seems to be a reasonable goal. For this reason, they do not understand why they cannot perform a piece of music with the same exactitude and science as the experiment or the calculus problem. They have a difficult time understanding the nature of an art form such as performing. It is illusive, it has changing moods and emotions, and it has depth and texture. A work of art has a life force of its own that demands complete understanding before all the

slips can fall away, before all the “should haves” and “could haves” can rest. This, in some cases, may take some time, perhaps a lifetime. Art is on the other side of the human spectrum from science and math, and yet remains connected. The root of our artistic life lies in the affective domain of the personality, that illusive, emotional, and even scary part of the human psyche, with long and extended branches that reach out to, and connect with the cognitive and physical aspects of the personality. We cannot perform music without our highly developed cognitive powers and astute physical prowess, and yet without the nurtured heart and soul of the human being, the music, no matter how accurate, will never sell.

One day the would-be musician will grow to become the artist. Then they will understand that a work of art can have no mistakes or things that could have or should have been better, it simply is. Moreover, their work will be judged based on the depth of understanding, sensitivity, and musical integrity with which it was performed, and not the number of slips or any self-imposed “could haves” or “should haves.”

Recitals are a tricky business full of scary places and yet full of wonderful delights. Nothing in life has only one side. There are positives and negatives with every thing we do. We can teach our children that the negatives are just as much part of the experience as the positives. We can tell them that there is no escaping them; our only choice is to accept them. Then and only then are we able to help them.