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MU 4280
Voice Pedagogy
Project: Voice Teaching Observations

Voice Lab II with Amanda Munton
April 23rd from 12:15-1:15

In voice lab, students have the opportunity to perform in front of their peers and get positive feedback and constructive criticism to better their performance skills. In this section each student that performed started by stating their name, the title and composer of the piece, and either described the scene or provided a translation of the words. When the piece was done, peers were more than willing to give feedback, which came as a surprise to me because in my voice lab, getting students to comment is like pulling teeth. All of the students were extremely involved and gave very helpful comments to the performer. They all knew how to see a problem and exercises to fix it, some of which comes from personal experience themselves. I think a key part to voice lab is that the students are usually kept in the same groups so they get to watch each other perform often and learn to recognize specific issues and habits in each individual. Being familiar with a group also creates a healthy and supportive environment for performance.

Jarika Olberg was the first to sing. She performed Habenera from *Carmen* by Bizet. Amanda first asked for peer feedback, and then asked Jarika for a self-evaluation, which led to a focus on interpretation. Most often with singers, as I've noticed from being in voice lab, as the interpretation improves the tone quality follows. Amanda had lots of tricks for helping Jarika free up her body and voice and to connect with the emotional meaning of the piece. Amanda first had Jarika move around the stage waving

her arms to free the tone. Using imagery to fix something like posture automatically enhances breathing technique and leads to better tone. Amanda then pulled a ball out of her magic bag for Jarika to use as an apple. Amanda had Jarika imagine she was wearing a dress with a very low cut back. By using all this imagery and movement, the focus is taken off the singing itself and it just flows naturally. If the singer knows the piece, the music just flows. After all of this movement, play, and imaginary dress-up, Jarika sang the piece again, thinking about the fluid movement and low cut dress. One phrase that stuck in my mind that Amanda said was that there may not be a physical prop with you on the stage, but whatever you create in your mind is there. You can make the audience believe anything, as long as you are completely devoted to the thought.

Next to sing was Louise Walsh and she did a fantastic rendition of *Just Can't Wait* from *My Fair Lady*. I had never heard Louise sing a musical theater piece, so I was surprised at the sounds that come out of her mouth. It was glorious! As I listened to the peer comments, it sounded like her interpretation skills had much improved over the past year, but as an ever-growing artist, there is always room for improvement. In this song, the character was mad and frustrated, so Amanda gave Louise a piece of paper, a "letter" describing her failing efforts, for her to crumple up and stomp on. It didn't give a drastic reaction, so Amanda had her huff and puff and stomp her feet. The combination of the two definitely inspired Louise to let go on the emotion and she noted that her mix was much easier to produce. Lastly, they worked on changing moods through the piece for variety. By changing the focus up, the quality of the interpretation is kicked up quite a few notches.

Samantha (I didn't catch the last name) performed a beautiful Bellini piece. I believe she is a musical theater major, so I was very impressed with the beautiful classical tone she was able to produce so easily. Sam was unable to roll her r's so Amanda told her the trick of putting a slight d before the r to give the illusion. With her background in theater, the interpretation was lovely. However, some vowels were too influenced by musical theater sound, so much of Amanda's help was with shaping vowels more appropriately. She had Samantha sing the piece first on an oo and had her switch to an ah, ee, and oh. The oh was the best, but the ah was too musical theater sounding, so Amanda has Samantha think aw instead, which worked much better. Amanda said something about hitting high notes that stuck in my mind as well. She said that if you set up the previous notes correctly than the high ones will come out. When Samantha tried her high notes again, she said they felt better and she could sing them with more ease. She needed more lower expansion to prepare the high notes and the dress she was wearing really allowed everyone watching to see the difference between poor and good expansion. Lastly, Amanda talked about how Samantha could modify vowels, such as the ee, for higher notes to get a prettier sound.

Finally, Brandee Peglow showcased her fabulous musical theater talents with *You Can Always Count on Me* from *City of Angels*. Amanda suggested that Brandee listen to recordings of jazz singers and how they use all sorts of different voices, like airy, chest, head, etc., and mix them up within one song. She challenged Brandee to think about the interpretation in a different way and it ultimately gave the song better direction. Because Brandee is so animated when she sings, Amanda said to be sure she doesn't give away the punch lines. There were a lot of funny things going on in the song,

but Brandee would occasionally give away the funny parts before they happened with the looks on her face or her body language. And lastly, Amanda suggested that Brandee change up the style of repeated lines to give color and variety.

Voice Lab I with Amanda Munton
April 28th from 10-11

The first year musical theater voice lab was set up pretty much identical to voice lab II. One difference is that Amanda video recorded the students' performances. There were two things I noticed that I would have done differently in the class. First of all, in my voice lab we have a system set up that if one of us is unable to sing we have a contact list to find a substitute so that everyone gets the most out of the lab. One of the students was unable to sing and another jumped in with little notice to sing in her place. Second, when I was in lab my first year, each and every time I sang I practiced walking on and bowing with my pianist. It seemed silly to me at first, but now that I'm doing more solo work, I greatly appreciate the practice. This group of first years did not practice entering and bowing, with the exception of one singer who was to perform in the recital later that day. Otherwise, it was an organized lab and the first years were very responsive and gave thoughtful and useful advice.

Jess Tolz performed first with the song Beautiful You. Amanda helped to fine tune the interpretation before Jess sang in the recital. She asked questions such as "What are you thinking? Who are you singing to?" to help Jess create a scenario with lots of details to put herself into. Amanda also suggested that Jess move closer to the piano in order to better communicate with the pianist and so that the lights were on her face and

not casting a shadow. They also worked on releasing tension, which seems to be, in my opinion, the root of almost all problems with singing. To assist in emotion growth to the climax, Amanda thought that the character could be struggling to find the right words and to switch focus in order to enhance the meaning of those words, rather than a constant frontal focus.

Santa Fe from the musical movie *Newsies*, performed by Ben Cesare, was certainly a powerhouse. That guy's got a huge voice. Ben seemed to tense up and breathe high, so Amanda had him stand on an exercise band and hold each end with his hands to force his shoulders to a lower position and make it easier to realize when he was raising them. She also noticed that he wasn't always taking in enough air, but has the capability to do so. It's just a matter of remembering to take in a sufficient tank each time. Amanda threw in a little character development; trying to get Ben to bring some spirit to his eyes, by having him walk around, have his hands in his pockets or arms crossed.

Brittany Calia stepped in at the last minute with *I Don't Know His Name*. Overall, her performance was technically quite good and emotionally connected. All Amanda had her do was to lay out a scenario with her talking to a friend and having the lines of the song be motivated by this friend's reactions. This idea worked really well and got a lot of response from Brittany.

Voice Lesson with Kyle Masterson and Skylar Aldrich
April 28th, 11:45-12:15

I was curious to watch Kyle teach a lesson because he is the only male voice teacher here and he graduated from Plymouth State. I've known Skylar since elementary school, so I was also looking forward to hear the progress he's made. I noticed a lot of the themes we work on in Voice Ped came up in his lessons, such as being familiar with the pharynx and how it is connected to singing. First, Kyle asked Skylar about general vocal health, which is particularly important this week with the vocally taxing Mozart Mass being rehearsed twice and performed twice. Kyle asked if Skylar had any questions or stresses about rep, and Skylar decided that his main goal for this lesson was to run his rep. I noticed right off that Kyle had a good, friendly relationship with Skylar. There was a lot of trust there and a sense of ease. The two were able to joke around and keep a cheerful mood but get some quality work done as well. It was a very healthy environment and I can certainly see the progress Skylar has made because of it.

For warm-ups, Kyle wanted to focus on blending the registers. Skylar's technique is quite good for a first year so there wasn't a need for more basic exercises. First Kyle had him slide from 1-5-1 on a v buzz and to plie on the intake, reminding him to take in a big tank of air. They did some sirens, stretched the face, 'chewed' and rolled the tongue, stretched the jaw and neck, all to release tension in the head, neck, and vocal mechanism. Kyle then had Skylar sing a pattern of 1-5-3-1 with the words "I love to sing", trying to create a pure tone while working through the passaggio. I could tell when Skylar hit the passaggio because the tone was dramatically different, much more

airy and the focus fell back. Kyle had him change to "la" and then brought the words back in. At one point Kyle noticed that Skylar was initiating the sound but then bringing it back and creating a straight tone. Kyle said to trust the initial sound and not to revert to a straight tone because it's what he thinks he wants. I think this goes back to allowing the voice to be free and the natural vibrato will come through, rather than forcing a straight tone onto something that wants to spin. A favorite phrase that Kyle said was "let the sound fall out of your face". It's a perfect image, and I'll be sure to add it to my bag of analogies. The last warm-up Kyle had Skylar do to really balance the registers was 1-3-5-8-5-3-1 on an oh vowel. He reminded Skylar that as he sings higher to increase the speed of the air, to maintain a steady column of air with lots of space, to imagine a taffy pull to keep every note connected, and to keep the sound forward and not pulled too far back.

Moving on to rep, Kyle went over Skylar's comment sheets from his last lab performance with him. Kyle asked what they worked on and what went well. I really liked the idea of reflecting with the teacher on peer comments and assessing a previous performance. Too often we're concerned about the now and the future that we forget to remember the past and fix it so the future doesn't reflect past problems. Kyle asked about memorization, since juries are coming up fast, and Skylar said it's coming. He knew all of his songs pretty well, so he was in really good shape. They started to work on a piece about a baseball game that had a really wide range. It had some pretty low notes that were beautiful and rich in Skylar's voice, and it also went into head voice and then falsetto. At one point Skylar sang up pretty high and Kyle said, "you're reaching", but it was more that Skylar was working too hard. Kyle said not to put so much effort

into making the note so strong, and the second time around it was glorious. I guess Kyle and Skylar made some great discovery about what Skylar does with his tongue when he sings, but I'm not sure exactly what this is. Either way, Skylar was having some issues with diphthongs, for example on the word "take". Kyle had Skylar almost take the diphthong out and bring it in at the last possible second, but the note didn't have spin. He reminded Skylar to approach the note from above and add spin, while not going right to the diphthong, and the word sounded fine. Overall, I was very impressed with both Skylar's performance and Kyle's teaching skills.

Voice Lesson with Victoria Cole and Louise Walsh
April 28th from 12:15-1:00

Victoria is my lab teacher, so I was slightly familiar with how she works. She has much experience with the Alexander Technique, and this was a prominent part of her teaching. First Victoria chatted with Louise about her performance in lab the other day, discussing preparation and interpretation. Victoria asked about Louise being nervous and said something I really liked, about practicing being nervous. By visualizing the performance space, imagining the symptoms that come along with nervousness, you then perform your song to the best of your ability in that situation.

For warm-ups Victoria started with Alexander Technique, releasing the neck and jaw, elongated and not collapsing the spinal column. She had Louise sing 5-4-3-2-1 alternating between and oo and an ee. At one point, Victoria asked Louise to stand profile to her, which I had never thought of before. Sometimes problems can't be seen from the front side, so it opened new ways of seeing problems or good things that are

happening. The next exercise was a slide on oh from 5-1. Louise used the mirror to fix minor problems with the formation of vowels by comparing extremes. Surprisingly, Louise had a problem with heavy singing, so Victoria gave her some tools to help that, including lip trills, staccato passages, triplet patterns, moving around, and being able to recognize and release tension. At first when Louise was singing more lightly, the sound was airy. When she was able to get rid of the airy sound, she said she felt vibrations in a different place, not in her throat as she had before, but in the mask. Victoria reminded her that feeling anything negative in the throat is a bad sign but that as long as the tone is produced correctly, sensations in the mask are normal.

When Charlie came in to play, the focus changed to rep. Victoria asked questions about the learning process of one particular song, for which Louise had gotten to the point of adding text. As she went through the song Victoria reminded her to release and relax and to keep the singer space higher because the sound needed more dimension. Victoria had Louise pinch her nose and sing because the sound was becoming too nasal. This exercise releases tension and forces a deeper, as opposed to shallow, sound. With all this space, Louise had a huge sound, but the piece was marked at a quiet dynamic. Victoria said that just because there is open space doesn't mean that everything has to be loud. While looking at Louise's music, Victoria commented that there should be a plethora of markings on the music; breaths, phrases, dynamics, and the like should cover a page, otherwise how do you remember what you've learned? They worked on taking low breaths and not waiting until the last second to breathe. Especially if there is an interlude, there's no reason to be gasping for air at the last second when it can be taken in over a period of two or three beats at the least. Breathing is a natural rhythm, so it's

important just let the air come in naturally. Victoria had Louise work on the emphasis of words, saying that the first word isn't always the most important one. That led to creating a more legato line and speaking the words in rhythm. This reminded Victoria that there is so much a singer can do without even singing. Just by speaking the words in a theater voice, you can use proper breath support and technique, work on diction and emphasis, and concentrate on interpretation, among so much else. At the end of the lesson Victoria reviewed with Louise all they had gone over and the tools for her to use in the practice room.

Compare and Contrast

All of the students I observed had a high level of involvement and commitment, which is especially great in the first year lab. The structure of both labs and lessons are a supportive and positive environment for learning healthy singing techniques and nurturing for social skills. Through the use of peer commenting in lab, students are learning not only how to positively give constructive criticism, but how to communicate with each other in an acceptable and professional fashion.

In all four situations, the goals all focus around improving the singer's technique and ability to perform with emotion and meaning. The common theme I've found in observing is that tension tends to be the main cause of problems with singing and emoting, whether it's a physical tension that can be pinpointed, or a mental tension that affects the emotional connection. Amanda's teaching style tends to be the use of interpretation to free the body and voice and engage the mind by connecting emotion to

the music. Movement and a strong connection to the words can automatically fix tone by simply by refocusing the attention on something other than the singing itself. Kyle's teaching style circle's around technique and the physicality of the voice. In order to understand what is happening when sound is produced, the singer needs to have a clear image of the vocal mechanism and how it works. From there, certain exercises and techniques can be used to strengthen skills. Victoria focuses on the physical aspect of singing by using the Alexander Technique. Recognizing that there is tension and learning how to release and inhibit that tension is the starting point for healthy, free singing.

Through observing I've learned that there are no like problems and each individual uses a different tool to fix a problem. For this reason, as a teacher I'll need to learn and acquire many different tools for fixing the same thing. As a singer, I need to learn to release my tension so that I can learn how to teach that to future students. I think that all three teaching styles I observed are affective and appropriate ways of working with singers. I'd like to hope when I begin to teach my own students that I can bring aspects of all three, emotional, technical, and physical, into lessons. The more ways a student has to work, the easier it will be to practice and improve. It's important to realize that with singing improvement doesn't always present in drastic change. Positive reinforcement and recognizing the little things will add up to an overall improvement and better singer.