

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF TEACHERS OF SINGING

ADELE ADDISON
D. RALPH APPELMAN
HERMANUS BAER
CLIFFORD E. BAIR
TODD DUNCAN
SHIRLEE EMMONS
WILLIAM GEPHART
ROBERT GROOTERS
KATHARINE HANSEL
HELEN HODAM
JOHN MCCOLLUM
RICHARD MILLER
MAC MORGAN
ELIZABETH MANNION
DALE MOORE

MEMBER, NATIONAL MUSIC COUNCIL

CHAIRMAN, DONALD READ, 2109 BROADWAY, NEW YORK, NY 10023
VICE-CHAIRMAN, SHIRLEE EMMONS, 12 WEST 96TH STREET, NEW YORK, NY 10025
SECRETARY, WILLIAM GEPHART, 75 BANK STREET, NEW YORK, NY 10014
TREASURER, ROBERT C. WHITE, JR., 600 WEST 116TH STREET, NEW YORK, NY 10027
PUBLICATIONS OFFICER, ROBERT GROOTERS, 245 OGDEN AVENUE, SWARTHMORE, PA 19081

GORDON MYERS
LOUIS NICHOLAS
RUSSELL OBERLIN
CHLOE OWEN
HENRY PFOHL
JOHN B. POWELL
DONALD READ
HARVEY RINGEL
GEORGE SHIRLEY
HERALD STARK
DOLF SWING
CRAIG TIMBERLAKE
ROBERT C. WHITE, JR.
WILLARD YOUNG

THE PROFESSIONAL CRITICISM OF SINGING

Music criticism is a specialized and relatively unremunerative field with a limited number of practitioners, none of whom is required to complete a standardized curriculum or program of professional preparation.

In this respect, critics are like voice teachers, whose training is haphazard in the absence of mandated requirements of voice study, vocal pedagogy, performance experience, musician-ship, language study and repertory--all leading to some system of examination and licensing.

Some safeguards against abuse and charlatanism exist, at least theoretically. Professional organizations, wherein qualifications and ethics may be considered and possibly improved, do provide safeguards against abuse and charlatanism.

Interdisciplinary exchanges between critics and teachers of singing were undertaken earlier in this century, when the music scene was relatively simple and unencumbered by new directions in popular music or by technological advances with their profound impact on performance, communication, and reception. It should be understood that both professions serve a broad clientele. An effort should be made through professional organizations to promote effective dialogue between teachers of singing and vocal performance critics, whose commentary appears in newspapers, popular magazines, and professional journals, or is heard on radio and television.

The absence of relevant criteria in the criticism of performance can and should arouse deep resentment. The work of critics makes a serious impact upon the lives and careers of performing artists. Sensitivity to that fact should be a constant element in the critic's consciousness. Problems of deadlines, space allocation, or other constraints and limitations should not restrict critics' attention to the facts nor the hows and whys of performance.

A critic should meet the obligations of any thoughtful journalist. First, there must be attention to factual detail--the standard "who, what, where, and when." Then it is the province of the critic to discuss the musical material, its significance and demands, along with subjective analysis of its performance. (The latter should be understood to be mere opinion, for that is all, indeed, that it is.) A fundamental awareness of the rigors of performance should surely equip the critic with a measure of humility, which always will act as governor of personal flare in descriptive writing. The ability to "turn a clever phrase," though acceptable in a well-executed

critique, should always be of secondary or tertiary import. Creative writing is a noble art, but it is not important in serious criticism.

Voice teachers, singers, and other musicians should be grateful if a critic displays supposed musicological erudition, while exhibiting thorough understanding of performance, its complications, and its demands. The result should be informationally sound and interpretively authentic for the reading or listening public. It should not bristle with idiosyncratic bias.

Among the relative criteria which should be represented by any critic of classical vocal music performance are the following:

1. Familiarity with representative repertory spanning major periods of Western vocal music.
2. A practical knowledge of the technical and theoretical aspects of the art of singing.
3. An understanding of music history and sufficient musicological study to deal with factual and theoretical questions of style and performance.
4. A broad educational background with some emphasis on music esthetics, languages, literature, and poetry.
5. Specialized knowledge of acting skills and techniques, and imaginative insight for characterization and interpretation.
6. A fundamental understanding of proper journalistic practices and obligations.

"Criticism" is, of course, opinion; but, if the language is abusive and confrontational, rather than factual and informative, it is easily and rightly dismissed. Many conditions militate against enlightened daily criticism. Deadlines, haste, and heavy schedules contribute to snap or superficial judgments. Acoustical environments, personal indispositions, weather, transportation problems, or even intoxication can affect opinion. Space limitations may result in editorial emendations or cuts which distort reviews or render them nonsensical. (Understanding a journalistic technique as simple as the "reverse pyramid" can help prevent "nonsense.") Critics who also function as teachers, coaches, conductors, composers, or adjudicators must be on guard against conflicts of interest and challenges of ethical propriety.

Members of the American Academy of Teachers of Singing believe that a critic has a multiple responsibility extending to the composer, the performer, the audience, the reader, *and* the exhibitor, without whom there may not have been a performance.

"The Professional Criticism of Singing," a Statement from the American Academy of Teachers of Singing, was originally published in *The NATS Journal* in 1991 and is reprinted with their permission