

Teaching voice online: Reflection and a practical advice

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Abstract: *This study is a reflection on the actual situation of teaching voice through the internet using a computer and it has several goals: to evaluate the pros and the cons of this practice; to inform the young singer about aspects unnoticed in lessons; and point out aspects of teaching voice that are being raised in the community such as pricing, communication between teacher/student and the use of imagery vs science terminology as part of teachers' methods. Microphones and audio systems have limitations for both teachers and students, therefore might not carry the harmonics and overtones of voice production on a voice lesson. However, online voice lessons can be a helpful mechanism. A practical advice for singers who cannot exercise their voices due to confinement is prescribed.*

Key-words: *Teacher, voice, online, pedagogy, singer, vocal.*

1. Introduction

The appearance of the coronavirus pandemics had, among many other results, the influence to accelerate several tendencies that were already happening in the world, although some were still unnoticed or even disregarded. One of them was giving voice lessons online, through internet, using a computer. Teaching voice online is a practice that was already observed in the last two decades, since the internet was widely available. It allowed teachers and students to connect with each other without having to commute or travel. It was so convenient, that not only private teachers would use it, but even college teachers who, when needed to travel to another city, would keep the class schedule and give their lessons online. This practice raised some moral issues, because a student, when enrolled in a graduate or undergraduate program, was not expecting to have voice lessons

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online. So the price paid for tuition was many times perceived as too high as online voice lessons were not worth it. However, those same teachers would also teach online in private classes, many times with high prices, in which students knew, beforehand, that the lesson would be online. This meant that yes, voice lessons were worth it. So what knowledge was passed during these lessons that were so relevant to be worth to have them online? Or were the students fooled because of lack of information regarding the quality of those lessons?

This article is a reflection on the challenges that students and voice teachers have on the internet era, specifically during these pandemic times, as many people cannot get together for lessons and therefore increased the number of lessons provided via the internet, either at college level or privately. This study is a reflection on this new way of teaching, with a practical solution for singers who don't have access to internet or singers who have access to internet but cannot sing full voice in the apartment for other reasons, and therefore cannot have a voice lesson via internet.

2. Objectives

This article addresses the challenges of teaching classical voice singing through internet using your computer and it has several purposes:

- a) to analyse the pros and the cons of this practice;
- b) to alert about aspects unnoticed from most singers;
- c) to reflect about aspects of teaching voice that are being raised in the community such as pricing, communication between teacher/student, the use of imagery or science terminology.

At the end it is given a practical solution for singers who cannot attend voice lessons but still need to be in shape vocally.

3. The current art of voice teaching

The voice teaching industry in the last decade has been rising the prices of lessons per hour, depending on the city or how famous the teacher is. There are also other aspects that contribute to the rising of the price of a voice lesson, such as the rise of the cost of life (Deveaux 2019, 456), but usually location and teacher fame are the main drivers. Back in the early 2000's, in New York City, it was common for the famous and prestigious teachers to charge between \$180 to \$250 per lesson of one hour, sometimes even only 45minutes. So a singer should ask himself: how

valuable is the information got in these lessons? Is it worth the price charged? And if so, can all that valuable information be learnt in only one hour? According to Miller “the amount of time available to the student and teacher is limited” (Miller 1996, 8).

After sharing these questions with some colleagues, the author of this article did a research to find if the information payed at those lessons were worth it in such short time. With 2000k saved, the author contacted 10 of the most prestigious voice instructors in New York City area and had at least 2 lessons with each, to make sure he got the most information out of each teacher, assuming only one lesson, with all the normal pressure, was not long enough to absorb all the information well. The share of knowledge between teacher and student was eloquent and the amount of information got in those lessons was sometimes impressive, but only one lesson was indeed too short and, for most, the information gotten was not worth the amount of money paid, since some teachers were working on mind games and psychological empowerment and not on valuable technique or interpretation skills.

The stress of performing well and doing exactly what the teacher wanted demanded a great amount of concentration, so recording these lessons was a good option so that the student could revisit them later in a practice room, listen to it once again with less pressure, and work on the criteria he would find most valuable for hours, if needed, to get results. After some practising sessions the author could indeed understand the technique issues he had and the solutions that were transmitted in that class. Note that this learning is extremely personal because not all singers understand what is communicated in the same way, and some are faster than others to understand the message and get it right. So, all learning is dependent on the communication teacher/student, and on the human connection the student has with the teacher (Gabriel 2005, 108).

“The content of the instruction offered is, of course, what the student is paying for” (Miller 1996, 208). Miller is referring that this should be a common practice by teachers and not taking advantage of being in a city and charging unpracticable fees for students. One should be aware that when a singer is young and ambitious, he wants to try everything as a singer, so when a singer finds a good voice teacher, or at least one that fits his technical issues, he believes the lessons are worth all the money. But note that good voice teachers are not always the most famous and might not even charge above average rates per lesson.

Another fact that is being observed over the latest decade is the rise of voice lessons given through the internet. As the internet has become more available and reliable all over the world, many teachers and students started using the computer to help them to connect and provide voice lessons.

Which are the reasons for a student to prefer to have voice lessons online (lower prices, convenience, etc.)? Can these online lessons replace in person lessons? Are online lessons reliable? What does a student have to gain or lose with this new type of communication channel?

Malcom, a professional singer, reports a relevant point to this work: "I had lessons with famous baritone Vladimir Chernov and his wife Olga Toporkova and started in New York City collaborating with them, particularly with Olga. They were both based near Vienna, Austria, and they would come often to New York City, but as times passed I felt the need of being in touch with them more often because of technique issues and adjustments I had to do and I was very insecure about it, so the only alternative for me was to have lessons via Skype.

This was a great opportunity for me to try what I was resisting about: having voice lessons via a computer. I had several lessons with Olga and they were for about 20-30 min each lesson. Actually, these lessons proved to be very helpful and helped me to keep my technique lined up".

After a more detailed conversation with Malcom about this experience, there are some interesting conclusions to take:

- the lessons were very helpful for Malcom;
- there were times Malcom felt he was doing exactly what the teacher wanted but she couldn't distinguish it because of the sound system;
- Malcom didn't get enough detailed orientation of what he was doing wrong;
- the lessons were long enough to be helpful;
- the lessons kept him in shape technically speaking;
- it was much more helpful to have the lessons via skype rather than not having them at all.

The technical information that a student can get from an online lesson can be credible, but there might still exist a need to have the physical presence of a voice instructor, because the results are undoubtedly different (Miller 1996, 215). The human connection regarding exposure has an impact on the student which makes the student to give more and try harder.

Online lessons raise also an important question about the quality of the sound system used and the audio technology incorporated in your computer. How true is the sound that the teacher hears through the computer? Can he/she listen all the harmonics and overtones produced by the student's voice? Could he/she listen the flow of the air speeding?

"The most important aspect of music production is the quality of the incoming signal" (Cafaro and Arneson 2020, 312). This can be a critical point because it involves a sender (microphone), that captures, codes and sends the

signal; the strength of the internet used (bandwidth); and a receiver (sound system) that receives, amplifies and reproduces the signal. So even if the voice teachers have a very strong signal on their internet and can listen to the student's voice without any breaks, are we sure that the signal reproduced is true to what was produced by the singer? How much of your voice can microphones get and sound systems reproduce?

There is much to be said about audio distortion and that is why there is an industry of professional microphones to be used in high quality recordings, and super potent and expensive sound systems with which you can hear super clearly. "Audio distortion is described as any deformation of an audio signal at an output compared to an input. Typically this comes from limitations in electronic components (analogue or digital)."² A microphone can simplify the audio signal that is captured, cutting some harmonics and therefore distorting the sound. Also, a sound system might not have the hardware capacity to fully reproduce the signal without distorting it.

So when Cafaro and Arneson refer that a voice teacher should invest on a basic sound system for their studio, the author believes this can be valid for voice lessons of pop and rock music, but not for classical training singing. The technical refinement and high demands of interpretation required on the classical singing might not be fully and truly captured by a basic microphone, nor entirely reproduced by a basic sound system.

These are technical limitations that need to be taken into account when evaluating the quality of a voice lesson, because it brings a new variable to the equation: what if the sound that the teacher listens to and evaluates is not exactly the sound that the student truly produced?

This might jeopardy the whole effectiveness of an online voice lesson.

4. Vocal pedagogy

Teaching voice is a very demanding job as it involves not only scientific knowledge, stage experience, music style, anatomy, linguistics, psychology, but also communication, because all depends on how a teacher can communicate to his student. "It is the teacher's task to develop a pedagogy that speaks to the student's needs. The successful teacher of singing will go beyond attempting to pass on to his or her students empirical performance sensations and experiences. She or he will

² <https://mynewmicrophone.com/what-is-total-harmonic-distortion-in-audio-and-microphones/>

find modes of instruction that develop rapport, that permit the diagnosis of problems, and that supply prescriptions for corrections through specific and communicable language, thereby saving time and producing measurable results” (Miller 1996, 9).

What is the right idea that the teacher should transmit so that the student understands? When a student does not understand the way the teacher address a problem, it is up to the teacher to do some adjustments on his form of communicating. So how can he approach the same problem in another way? Also, what is correctly and easily understood by one student might not be understood by another student, who might need the teacher to approach that same problem in the exact opposite way. Therefore, the teacher needs to put himself inside of the student’s brain to figure out what the student is thinking and feeling on his vocal instrument, after which he can suggest an idea or approach to correct the problem. A voice teacher needs to be flexible and to have a big sense of intuition to correctly read the students difficulties, but he is also required to have the knowledge of several methods and teaching philosophies to supply them as prescriptions for correction of the diagnosed problems. This makes teaching a very subjective and complex profession (Dufault 2013, 33).

“(…) The development of voice science has changed both voice pedagogy and the perception of voice production” (Greschner 2019, 230). We all know that vocal pedagogy has been studied to a great level of knowledge known nowadays. What is known of vocal technique has reached high levels of science specially in the last 50 years, in a very fast and reliable way. Science development brought precise information on the function of vocal mechanisms and the production of sound. This information is used by teachers on their philosophy of teaching and divides them into the use of vocal science terminology and vocal imagery terminology (Miller 1996, 69). The question is: should a voice teacher be more scientific (using specific terminology) rather than using abstract images while teaching? There is a big controversy amongst teachers regarding this subject (Dufault 2013, 34).

Since the invention of the laryngoscope by Manuel Garcia in 1854, allowing people to watch the movement of the vocal chords, science raised a voice in the pedagogy field while, before that, there was only the use of imagery and emotions. One cannot forget that there were 3 centuries of voice teaching before “science” raised this voice.

The author Rachel Ware conducted a survey about the use of science or imagery in voice studios in the United States and Canada. The majority (83%) of the teachers interviewed answered they used a combination of both imagery and science in their studios (Ware 2013, 417). There are no geographic frontiers regarding teaching voice, as globalization brought sharing ideas worldwide, so the

author feels comfortable assuming that this could be observed worldwide. Being flexible on the usage of terminology and imagery as a form of communication with students is a great asset for any teacher, as it increases the flexibility required to correctly transmit an idea to the student. This is a fact that should be more interiorised.

4. Pros et cons of teaching voice online via a computer

It is important to analyse this concept from the student's perspective, given it is the student who is in need of an advice, counselling and support on his journey as a musician.

According to observation, discussion and research on the subject of having voice lessons through a computer, main pros are:

- the student can still watch his teacher while singing;
- the student can watch himself while singing and therefore it's easier for him to follow the instructor's advice to correct any tension there might be in the student's face;
- having a lesson that can keep the student in shape vocally;
- quick fix;
- motivates the student;
- gives the student self-assurance;
- good to practice exercises that are enough for lining up the student's technique;
- no need for travelling to meet the teacher – save time and money;
- if the student is using a recorded accompaniment of his song/aria, he needs to sing in tempo all the way to the end. After all, when a singer sings with an orchestra, he has to do it this way.

The cons are:

- service can break down easily;
- harmonics and overtones might not be fully captured and transferred by the student's microphone;
- the teacher might have difficulty to listen all the vocal harmonics that the student produced;
- the sound system of the teacher's computer might not transmit correctly or entirely the student's problems regarding breathing, placement and resonance;

- does not bring the excitement of performing live with piano accompaniment;
- less personal (singing is a very intimate activity it needs “an audience”, not a screen)
- difficult communication;
- no correction with the teacher’s hands (breathing).

With this in mind, the first question that a singer needs to ask himself is: what is the purpose of this lesson, and what am I expecting from it?

A simple 10 minute online talk with the teacher to get a nice word of confidence might be enough for a professional performer who is nervous about the premiere of the show. However, it might not be the enough for a singer who is making technique adjustments, has an important audition or needs more than just a quick fix. So the student’s level also matters in the effectiveness of the lesson, but not only. Most important, is what the singer needs in that precise moment.

For both teachers and students, besides being a great vehicle to meet worldwide, technology and internet became a very important tool to seek more knowledge and information about voice science, to watch webinars, conferences and the list can be endless (Wiley and Peterson 2008, 177).

Voice teachers and singers can become more educated not only technically, but also in several other subjects related to singing and performing, such as advices on how to control anxiety, or history and testimonials of composers and performers.

5. Practical advice for singers

Nowadays we are facing the pandemics of COVID-19 in our society. Arts and performers are devastated everywhere with no solution yet to solve the problem of people getting together. Still singers need to keep their voices in shape, at least with warming up, which is the first step to start singing. For singers, the “warming up” is a specific operation of a set of muscles that start to work gently for singing specific outcomes. After warming up, singers report to have a better pitch range, overcoming register transitions and becoming easier to command their instrument. This is why warming up is a component of voice pedagogy.

However, it might be a challenge for singers to warm up during the pandemics, specially during periods of lockdown, when people cannot leave their homes, practice rooms are closed and singing at the apartment or hotel room

might not be socially acceptable. Still, singers need to find a solution for warming up their instrument.

Olga Makarina³, a great voice pedagogue, shared with the author the following ideas for a voiceless warm up which are a good advice for all singers: for a voiceless warm up you need to (a) find your support and (b) be vertical all the time. To achieve these two goals she suggests two basic exercises:

- On a voiceless consonant as S, try to say it, but while you say it have the shape of an U vowel at the same time, while you exhale air. Do it as long as you can and shake it with your abdomen several times. You will see the resonators warming up and your support will be connected with your air flow.
- With consonant H exhale air through your mouth but at the same time do it with the shape of the French vowel U or the German umlaut ü several times, several dynamics of air flow. After doing this several times, and this can be done all day long, you will be more aware of where your sound needs to move because air is passing on your hard palate. If you know your sound needs to move and if your resonators are warmed up, you are ready to try your voice.

With these exercises a singer can have his voice warmed up in any setting.

6. Conclusions

There is a balance required on a voice teacher's common sense to be successful in his/her studio. The same applies to the fact of teaching voice online. It should be a tool to help and guide your student, but it should not be the only tool used and should not be relied upon for long periods of time. It has many advantages for the student to develop his singing skills, and these should be weighted with the disadvantages so that the student evaluates if it is worth to have it. Price, convenience and specially in times like we currently live in, when a pandemic limits people's mobility and behaviour, this tool can be very helpful for all levels of singers, although in no way replaces the presence of a voice teacher in in-person lessons.

³ Olga Makarina - Soprano, voice teacher, Carnegie Hall, Metropolitan opera house, New York City Opera, Teatro Colón Buenos Aires, Bolshoi Theatre. Roles: Lucia di Lammermoor, Gilda Rigoletto, La Traviata, Amina La Sonnambula, Donna Anna Don Giovanni, Lucrezia Borgia, Manon, Mimi La Boheme, Anna Bolena etc. Conductors: James Levine, Zubin Mehta, Vladimir Gergiev, Eve Queller, Bruno Campanella, Sir Neville Merriner, Marcello Viotti etc. She is the founder of the Grand Stage international foundation for young singers.

A student should be aware of the disadvantages that an online class has, such as limitations of the hardware used (both microphone and sound system of both students and teacher) and take it into account when evaluating it's need, if it is worth the price to pay for it and it's result.

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