

## Article-dialogue on the lyrical voice and the pedagogy of singing. From Transylvania to Lusitania: a happy encounter

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**Abstract:** *Our contribution is a reflection based on the living experience of two people born in different countries who, fortunately, met in a pedagogic situation. That changed their life. They shared the love of singing and the need to express emotions and feelings; this encounter developed into a Master/Disciple relationship, something that is common to many singers—to find someone who can be a mirror and contribute to its vocal and personal development. Untypically for a scientific article, we call it an article-dialogue, divided into Prologue, Five Acts and Epilogue, where Liliana Bizineche (LB) and Maria João Sousa (MJS) reflect about their own experience i.e. guidelines in a singing class, the importance of choosing the repertoire based on the student's voice, a student as a personality of an artist, the contribution of teaching in the artistic path and a brief panorama of singing teaching in Portugal in the 90s and nowadays.*

Key-words: *Singing, Pedagogy of Singing, Master, Disciple*

### 1. Prologue

**LB** – I started to appreciate music as a child, in the company of my parents, when I discovered this passion by watching performances in the musical theater and concerts by the orchestra and choir of the Braşov Philharmonic. Both my parents were music lovers, endowed with beautiful voices, being part of the orchestra choir in our city in Transylvania. I started the piano lessons at six years old with Eckart Schland, organist at the Black Church of Braşov, who helped me take my first steps into music. Later, on my 17th year, the encounter with the soprano and singing teacher Valentina Cretoiu changed my life. I learned to respect the

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voice as an instrument in permanent evolution, studying the lyrical repertoire appropriate to my voice. It was an enthusiastic, passionate, and persevering study on the opera and concert stages with the demanding assistance of my Master for over 30 years. I used to listen to her telling me over and over: “you’d be a good pedagogue because you have the patience and the knowledge to teach how to sing”. That phrase, at the time, did not convince me, knowing how complex the role of a teacher was. In my second homeland, Portugal, I was challenged to give singing lessons. The first students were those who admired my singing and wanted to do the same. Since 1993, I have continued to prepare generations of singers, many of them having successful national and international careers now. An example worthy of praise is my student Maria João Sousa, who began studying singing at the age of 18. She has always been in a constant progress, graduating with a singing degree and a master's degree in singing teaching. I present with great enthusiasm and admiration the soprano that, in addition to concerts and recitals of various styles, from baroque to contemporary music, shines on stages in Portugal and abroad. At the beginning of our work, I recognized in her the skills and the talent, not only of a singer, but also of a singing teacher. She is building a career based on her devotion, love of teaching, having surprising results with her students.

**MJS** – There are some moments from my childhood that show the importance of singing in my life. My mother realized that I should study music when I was already singing melodies, even before speaking. I studied violin from 8 to 20 years old, but the dream of being a singer was always throbbing in my daily life. When I heard someone singing, and when I sang in the children's choir, I always gave my best, with enthusiasm and dedication. In this choir, I participated during 12 years in the productions of São Carlos National Theater (TNSC – Lisbon Opera House). In 1992, I sang in Carmen of Bizet, whose Carmen was Liliana Bizineche. At the time I was 11 years old, and I didn't even dream that 7 years later I would be in my first singing class with this lady who would be my Master. The first years of singing lessons with Liliana Bizineche were in fact very special and transformative: my relationship with myself and with the world changed; I gained patience, recognizing that things would not appear done overnight. I studied every day, obsessed, waiting fervently for the weekly class. I would always be in class with the warm-up done, as the singing class was a moment of performance and evolution. I was drinking every word of the teacher, enjoying every second. With this dedication, and now as a teacher, I recognize that it was atypical, the relationship between me and the teacher became closer. I saw in the teacher a model to follow, and I lived times of fascination in which everything was possible. The teacher had a fundamental role, because within

her rigor and patience, she was affectionate and stimulated the best in each one of us. Interestingly, one day the teacher also told me that I would become an excellent teacher. I didn't want to believe it because I knew the responsibility of being one. But, in fact, I was watching my colleagues' lessons and thinking about how they could improve. Time had passed, I graduated with the teacher and then it was time to get to know other approaches, other teachers, I did several master classes, but the affection and gratitude were always present, and I have a friend in Liliana. My teaching of singing had started 15 years ago, with an invitation, which I accepted with fear and care. Each year that passes, each student that passes (and stays), enriches my journey.

## 2. First Act: Guidelines in a singing lesson

**LB** – The singing class allows us to share a different dimension that goes beyond the usual way of teaching. It's about to discover the persons and their way of singing, of expressing a wide range of their own emotions. The basic steps of the vocal technique, once learned, are transformed into body sensations at the level of the abdominal and intercostal muscles, and at the level of finding the way in which the cranial cavities are used as a resonator allowing the transfiguration of sound. The teamwork teacher-student leads to a permanent evolution of the singer. The voice instrument is by nature delicate, however, being well guided, overcomes the inherent challenges of the repertoire – what seems impossible becomes possible. In addition to technique and persevering study, the passion for a musical ideal also determines the singer's artistic personality. The Romanian composer George Enescu said that “for this profession there is a need of patience and courage”<sup>3</sup>. One may find the follow steps in a singing lesson, first the warming up of the body and of the voice, then, the preparation of a score: at first, there's the musical and rhythmic reading, assimilating the words, then singing with only one vowel (choosing the best one) until the voice adapts to the musical phrases. After understanding the sound and its feeling, words are included. In accordance with the understood poem or text, the approach to the work begins in its own style. As we sing, we are always learning, so the more we study, the firmer confidence in our inner strength takes hold.

**MJS** – When we have a singing student in front of us, a sense of responsibility invades us. On the one hand, we know that the student expects from us the miracle of evolution, of wanting to sing better, of increasing his capacity for projection, of being able to express him better and better, of putting out that

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<sup>3</sup> This quote was taken from an interview with the Romanian conductor Sergiu Celibidache.

happiness of singing – in the exchange of glances, we feel the expectation of whoever is in front of us. On the other hand, we know that we will be the guide of that voice, that pilgrimage in the coming times, we know that it will be a patient, endemic, intrinsic work, like a child who grows, and the mother only notices it, because of the clothes that seem to have shrunk. Along with patience, it is also up to the teacher to maintain energy and courage, as we know, as students, that the path often seems stagnant. The teacher knows that apparently stagnant; the path is in permanent evolution. In view of this important awareness that occurs in the first moment, work is urgently needed. The breaking of stone. Let's get to work! As a teacher of young people, it is important to create routines in the classroom, so that they can be taken to work from home. Consciousness of a relaxed but active posture, like an animal standing still, is ready to defend or attack. After postural exercises, we will do breathing exercises, awareness of abdominal and diaphragmatic breathing. Depending on student's age, there will also be explanations about voice physiology and anatomical characteristics, as well phonetics, translation, and general meaning of the text, as well as the context of the composer, time, and specific characteristics of the work in question (poet, libretto). After the piece is known from a musical, rhythmic and word point of view, we will improve the expression. I inherited from my Master the constant search in alliance with the student, respecting his voice, motivating, and always encouraging him.

### **3. Second Act: The importance of choosing the repertoire based on the student's voice**

**LB** – My repertoire suggestions are based on the knowledge of each student's voice potential and temperament. It's definitely a challenge! At the beginning of the study, I'm going to try out several contrasting pieces that force to reveal the unknown qualities of the young singer (18-19 years old). The assiduous practice motivated by the love of singing, despite the initial technical difficulties, as well as the persevering repetition are the signs of a good path that will bring good results. The better one gets with a vocal interpretation a new vision of the score develops itself. Hence, it is important to stimulate the interest of different musical styles from early music to contemporary one. Finally, each singer may have his own choice.

**MJS** – The student's voice must be respected as a whole, whether in extension, volume, or timbre. As a teacher of teenagers, I highlight the following aspects, about the importance of choosing the repertoire, as it will be decisive for the good and healthy evolution of the student: a) vocal range must be respected (Pereira 2009; Phillips 1992; Sarfatiet al. 2002; Simpson 2013; Zahner 2000); b) develop the articulatory system through spiels, tongue-twisting and phonetic

exercises (Zahner 2000); c) songs in the mother tongue are important, as they are associated with children's oral and musical tradition (Simpson 2013; Zahner 2000); d) language must be age-appropriate (Simpson 2013; Zahner 2000); e) there must be an association of sound-movement combined with breathing (Coelho 2012; Pereira 2009); f) both melody and rhythm should be neither too simple nor too complex (Simpson 2013; Zahner 2000); g) the themes must be to the student's liking (Simpson 2013; Zahner 2000); h) the physiological and emotional characteristics of each child must be respected (Pereira 2009); i) high notes should be avoided, as well as sustained and long sentences (Pereira 2009); j) strong dynamics should be avoided (Simpson 2013); k) it is important to pay attention to the musical quality of the song (Zahner 2000); l) a repertoire with rapid register changes should be avoided (Simpson 2013); m) the level of difficulty of a song must be checked and the teacher must verify whether it is age-appropriate (Pereira 2009; Simpson 2013; Zahner 2000).

#### **4. Third Act: The singing student – the personality of an artist**

**LB** – Defining the Artist is complex: it's someone who is involved in the production of art, who is making creative art, and is a person who is dedicated to art! Transforming a singing student into an Artist is a long-lasting job. Each person has their own talent, their own understanding, passion, and interest that are constantly expanding. In addition to the interpreted repertoire and the musical influence with which he identifies, a singer seeks to drink from the sources of the tradition of the singing school of great performers: artists who enchant us and guide us to discover what is best for us to express ourselves. It's relevant to mention that the permanent coaching lesson and the work with stage directors and conductors are also crucial. The artistic personality needs its own time and determination to improve itself.

**MJS** – Each student is a potential singer. In each potential singer beats an artist's heart. Even students who do not want to be professional have within them the need to share their voice, their artistic personality! As a teacher, it is my task to respect that personality and lead it within the parameters of a controlled, safe, well-placed voice, always serving the music and the composer. Respecting this personality is giving it space, trying to understand its internal and specific pulsations. I'm in a middle way of in one hand there is the artist with his choices and characteristics and on the other hand there's the work of a specific time, composed by someone who, in turn, also had the need to create a certain work.

## **5. Fourth Act: The contribution of teaching in the artistic path**

**LB** – The gift of singing is a vocation. This vocation brings the responsibility to do it in the best way, with awareness and dignity becoming thus the goal of a lifetime. The work becomes a pleasure, especially when the results exceed expectations. Teaching has become a complement to my art. In parallel with the preparation of my opera roles and concert programs, my passion for teaching increased. My precious time in which I guided the young singers to discover the instrument and its unexpected beauty was well used because the results were surprising. I am happy that my teaching worked well for the people I had taught for them to become full field professionals. I am very grateful for what I have got and what I am giving in return.

**MJS** – Being a teacher has undoubtedly helped me in my artistic path, from a technical point of view and from an artistic point of view. Technically, spending the days teaching, I end up spending a lot of time weekly, thinking about the voice as a magnificent instrument, finding solutions for so many different voices, exemplifying, demonstrating the requested examples in my own skin. Looking for images and solutions for students, I have my brain focused on the instrument, with constant stimulation. From the expressive point it also contributes, because by listening to different interpretations, different artistic choices, I'm also enriching my emotional lexicon. Finally, in all my concerts I always have at least one of my students to watch, which fills me with joy and responsibility.

## **6. Fifth Act: Panorama of singing teaching in Portugal in the 90s and today**

**LB** – I arrived in Portugal shortly before 1990 but I knew the musical life since the 1980s because of the first concerts at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (FG) and my performances at TNSC: Renowned conductors, such as Michel Corboz who founded the FG choir; Gino Becchi who was part of the TNSC and prepared the soloists; the important courses at Casa de Mateus where the Spanish singer Lola Rodriguez de Aragon, (teacher of Teresa Berganza) taught singing Masterclass such as Ileana Cotrubas, Gustav Leonhard, Alicia de la Rocha were some of the prominent guests at the Music Festivals. I realized that the teaching of singing was little highlighted compared to other instruments such as the piano or the wind instruments. Later, due to the opening of higher education courses at the Universities of Porto, Aveiro, Lisbon and Évora, the interest of students to graduate in singing grew dramatically. Talented young singers often choose to pursue the studies in London, Salzburg, Amsterdam or Paris. Since I

started teaching, I had trained several generations of singers and singing teachers. I'm proud because the heritage built based on the Romanian school of singing under my beloved Master Valentina Cretoiu left me was an influence on a significant number who, in part, have achieved brilliant careers in and outside Portugal.

**MJS** – Teaching children to sing is historic and there is a long European tradition of male children's vocal study. However, from the mid-twentieth century, due to lack of knowledge of the particularity of the children's vocal tract, it started to be considered dangerous to teach young people, precisely because of the transformations in the vocal system itself. Children were taught as little adults and this did profound harm to many young singers who forced their voices (Pereira 2009; Zahner 2000). However, they never stopped singing in choirs and shouting in the school playground. In Portugal, Ildaete Giga also noted that:

“The lack of knowledge that it is possible to help children to progressively build their singing voice before puberty has led to neglect of this very important aspect of early childhood vocal education. In the 20th century, all the great music pedagogues recognized the primordial role of singing in music education. However, not all attached the same importance to the specific work in the child's voice development. (...) The voice is a musical instrument that can and should be developed.” (Giga 2004, 69)

I started my singing lessons in 1999. I was 18 years old, and it was the right age to start, according to tradition. The teachers were singers who often had never read about voice pedagogy and did not accept young people under 17-18 years old. Their own experience as singers and as students was worth to them. Some respected the student but there was often lack of patience for the evolution, being able to force his voice, with little respect in the choice of repertoire (it was heavy most of the time). Whoever had a musical background, evolved consistently. However, those who began their musical studies later, would have serious gaps in terms of reading a score, delaying the preparation of the repertoire.

In the United States of America, the position was different from Europe. In 1989, for example, voice specialists indicated to pedagogue Kenneth Phillips that it was possible and advisable to train and educate young voices (Zahner 2000). If the teacher is aware of the young person's stage of development and the correct characteristics and strategies to teach and motivate, it is advisable to teach children to sing, as all children without vocal pathology must learn to sing (Giga 2004; Welch 2001; Zahner 2000). Thus, in 2002, in the statement of the American Academy of Singing Teachers, it was indicated that it is beneficial to teach children or young people in vocal change, if there is a base of scientific knowledge about

physiology of children's voice (Pereira 2009; Phillips 2014; Zahner 2000). The pedagogue Welch (2001, 13) even goes forward with the statement that if an adolescent shows difficulty, it “will probably be the product of inadequate pedagogies”.

The singing course for young people in Portugal was only recognized by Portuguese Law in 2012<sup>4</sup>. Only from that date onwards was the teaching of children from 10 years of age official. With the growing knowledge of voice pedagogy, it was already known that it was healthy to start teaching singing voice from that age, as long as the child's level of development was respected: monitor the evolution of the range (especially in boys), assign repertoire adequate to physical and psychological age, laying the foundations for posture, voice and breathing physiology, improving reading, tuning, diction, pronunciation and phonetics; all this is possible, always seeking to motivate the student!

Nowadays, there are more and more singing teachers with notions of pedagogy and more and more students singing in a healthy and correct way from an early age!

## 5. Epilogue: A friendship –a relationship that surpassed the classroom

**LB** – A meeting of souls that vibrate alike was the connection with my Master, my spiritual Mother to whom I owe my evolution in my career and in life. She sometimes said that “you will be lucky to find a student who will fit in as much on a musical and human level as the two of us do”. I finally found MJS who can easily be the person my Master was talking about 40 odd years ago in Romania. She is the soul made that resonates with me on professional and personal level.

**MJS** – The Master-Student or Student-Master relationship is something that is referenced by great singers. I chose three examples, from the many consulted, which portray that this relationship is based on mutual respect, rigor, discipline, and admiration. Maria Callas found in Elvira de Hidalgo “une seconde mère pour elle, une amie, un professeur rigoureux et passionné” (Crico 2000, 11). Teresa Berganza found her Master in Lola Rodríguez Aragón and vice versa: “The knowledge of the great teacher's pedagogy will readily discover the genius of her who would end up being a favorite disciple” (Berganza 1984, 65). The Portuguese Tomás Alcaide also met his teacher Fernando Ferrara in Milan, who, in addition to being a good pedagogue, helped him from a financial point of view, never letting him alone when he needed it most, until he achieved the recognition he deserved. As a form of gratitude, Tomás Alcaide, after recognition, always sent a percentage of his cachets to his master: “Dear

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<sup>4</sup> Ordinance No. 225/2012 of 30 July and No. 243-B/2012 of 13 August.



Tomasino, I have unlimited confidence in your artistic future and your gifts of heart. Let's do this: from now on, you'll always eat here, in our house, and you'll only pay, later, when you start your career and earn money” (Alcaide 1961, 52). With the teacher Liliana, there was a lot of patience and respect for my voice, for its development. The teacher was always looking for the repertoire that suited my personality, to facilitate technical development. Quickly the empathy felt inside the classroom, reciprocated, spilled out of it. Long conversations, sharing with each other fears and frustrations as well as joys and successes of the profession. She went from being a teacher to become friend. As a friend, we also started to share family moments, birthdays, holidays, Christmas, New Year's Eve. It is a relationship of Infinite Gratitude.



Fig.1. After a final recital in a Master class by LB (MJS as a student) – 2002

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