VOICE STUDENTS interested in exploring early music don’t have the options of a violinist trying out a Baroque bow, or a pianist getting the feel of a harpsichord, where the instruments themselves help guide the player in the direction of historical sounds and methods. To a great degree, a singer of early music has to fashion his or her own instrument, which can be a life-long task, while also figuring out how to use that instrument—with stylistic beauty, apt technique, and interpretive knowledge—to effectively re-create more than seven centuries of repertoire.

While teachers of lute, harpsichord, and other early instruments have a rich body of contemporary advice and hardware manuals on which to draw, singing teachers are still struggling to interpret the historical documents in order to understand the actual techniques used to train students centuries ago. In addition, the guidance of any voice teacher is often colored by personal principles unrelated to historical techniques. It is not surprising, then, to learn that voice training in early music programs at the college level is pretty much a hit-or-miss proposition.

Early Music America’s web site lists several degree programs from colleges and universities in the U.S. and Canada (www.earlymusic.org/Content/Resources/DegreePrograms.htm), all of which, like most early music organizations and festivals, are run by instrumentalists. Perhaps this explains the low profile of the voice component at many of these schools. Of the 19 programs listed by EMA, only 11 even name a voice teacher. Surprisingly, several high-profile institutions, such as Boston University, New England Conservatory of Music, Cornell University, and Oberlin College, offer numerous and strong specialized instrumental teachers but do not list a voice teacher for their early music programs.

As explanation, Julianne Baird muses, “maybe the mainstream voice teachers are freezing them out.” Indeed, a school with a strong opera department might face pressure from voice teachers who are suspicious of early music’s reputation as a voice-wrecker. A singer who dabbles in Baroque repertoire is often a safe hire, able to pass muster with the other voice faculty but still presenting credentials in historical performance, even if his or her early music experience is limited to annual presentations of Handel’s Messiah.

Baird has noticed that most of her summer workshop students are “filling in the blanks from their degree programs. Often, their official teachers do not have the background in early music or are just not comfortable with the style. Occasionally, I’ll get a student whose teacher is actually opposed to techniques such as modulating vibrato—or other methods the teacher finds distasteful. Some of my students are pursuing musicology degrees because their program doesn’t have a suitable early music voice teacher.”

Ellen Hargis also mentions programs that “offer lots of performing opportunities and musicological study but with a voice teacher who hasn’t come up through the system. The
teacher may be excellent for technique but might be unable to help with matters of performance practice.”

**Generalize? Specialize? Collaborate?**

Is the situation Baird and Hargis describe a good thing or a bad thing? Many conductors, music directors, singers, and voice teachers speak about a trend toward more generalized vocal training and the need to redefine “early music singer.” (See sidebar on page 24-5.) For Drew Minter “one of the biggest problems facing the early music voice teacher is familiarity with many styles. The term ‘early music’ now comprises the early *bel canto* back to as many centuries for which we have music to interpret. It’s not enough just to know Tosi, Mancini, Porpora, and Garcia; you have to be familiar with Medieval song and then be able to teach someone how to blend in Renaissance ensemble music as well.”

While Medieval music is still confined to what Benjamin Bagby refers to as an “obscure corner of the music world,” later solo repertoires, especially Baroque music, have been absorbed into the mainstream, and this is reflected at most teaching institutions.

Jeffery Kite-Powell laments the lack of interest in early vocal techniques among the voice faculty at Florida State University, where he is director of early music activities. “Professor Roy Delp (coordinator of the voice faculty) is basically the only voice instructor who teaches students interested in early music. I believe his approach is pretty general, largely because that was his training. The FSU College of Music is about as traditional as you can get when it comes to the voice, and none of the new teachers has an interest in early voice.”

Even with a number of historically aware ensembles offering plenty of performing opportunities, Kite-Powell relies on master classes from visiting professionals in the field of early music to inspire the singers.

At some institutions listed on EMA’s web site, the opportunity to specialize in early music is not entirely clear. Duke University offers an M.A. in performance practice and lists a voice teacher but according to Susan Dunn, who directs Duke’s Opera Workshop and also serves as the music department’s director of undergraduate activities, the degree is “aimed toward early music, but it is not primarily a performance degree; by that I mean that there is no requirement to take lessons and no recital component.”

A number of schools have strong voice departments chaired by singers with broad experience who are also sensitive to the needs of special repertoires. Phyllis Bryn-Julson, for example, head of the voice department at the Peabody Conservatory, believes in taking “a general approach with all students, largely because of developing a strong and flexible technique requiring vibrato. Only after the voice is built do we begin introducing straight tone and, with care, teach the ‘why’ of straight tone to be musically correct. The older students have hopefully had experience with the older instruments and can begin to use their technical skills to be simpatico with the instruments.” Even though she and colleague William Sharp are comfortable and experienced in early styles, Bryn-Julson notes, “we count on coaching from the early music depart-
The Artist and the Academy

ment, because we don’t consider ourselves to be entirely expert on the subject.” This collaboration between voice and early music departments has led to several successful theater projects, including a recent performance of Hildegard von Bingen’s Ordo Virtutum.

At McGill University, Valerie Kinslow is the early music voice specialist, but students are invited to study technique with any of the voice teachers, provided they coach with Kinslow or with Hank Knox, head of the early music program. Again, cooperation with the opera department results in an annual fully staged production of an early opera (recently Monteverdi’s Il Ritorno d’Ulisse in Patria, Handel’s Semele, and Les Sauvages of Rameau).

James Tyler runs the early music performance program at the University of Southern California, where singers can work toward an M.A. or a D.M.A. in early music performance. “Singers are required to take the same academic and ensemble courses as instrumentalists. The only difference is that the singers’ historical instrument is the voice.” Mary Rawcliffe is the school’s assistant professor in historical vocal techniques, and Tyler notes, “we also encourage vocalists to study with one of the modern teachers at the school; they have an amazing knack for strengthening students’ voices without affecting their vocal agility.”

Variety of styles

At the University of North Texas, Lyle Nordstrom has built a large and thriving early music program with a full performance schedule, including Baroque opera, and plenty of ensembles open to students. Singers have a variety of degree options but are not able to study early music exclusively. “Our philosophy at UNT,” says Nordstrom, “is that early music is part of the total continuum of music, and that a singer, if possible, should be able to do a variety of styles, early music being one of them.” Although the voice faculty includes Richard Croft and Lynn Eustis, with early music credits here and abroad, Nordstrom proudly notes, “we have a variety of professional early music singers coming for yearly workshops and master classes.” The ones Nordstrom names – Jennifer Kinslow or with Hank Knox, head of the early music program. Again, cooperation with the opera department results in an annual fully staged production of an early opera (recently Monteverdi’s Il Ritorno d’Ulisse in Patria, Handel’s Semele, and Les Sauvages of Rameau).

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Another important and well-established program is the Early Music Institute at Indiana University, under the direction of Michael McCraw, where performing opportunities and specialized ensembles abound. Paul Elliott, with credits running the gamut of historical styles, is the program’s voice teacher. Elliott speaks of his intention to provide a solid technical foundation, allowing for tweaking as necessary for certain repertoires. “I don’t think of early music vocal technique as specific. There is a bag of tricks singers need to acquire to sing the music of different periods. Defining these techniques and knowing which style of music requires which tools from the bag is the true job of the voice teacher. We encourage students to experience ‘standard’ repertoires and think seriously about the issues involved in performing all music.”

In terms of size, the Longy School of Music in Boston is at the opposite end of the spectrum from Indiana’s large EMI. The voice teacher in the early music department is Laurie Monahan; she has extensive experience in historical techniques, especially in Medieval and Renaissance styles. Longy’s Early Opera Project presents a full length, fully staged opera, using historical theatrical techniques, every other year. Past projects have included Lully’s Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme, Peri’s Euridice, and Jacquet de la Guerre’s Céphale et Procris. In addition to the personal attention a small institution can provide, Longy’s location in the early music mecca of

Can Opera Singers and

Pondering the difficulties of running an early music program with only traditional voice teachers raises the question: is voice teaching becoming more specialized or more generalized, and how does this affect the student and the program? Additionally, if singers interested in early music now expect their careers to embrace everything from Medieval and Renaissance music with small ensembles to Handel operas in mainstream venues, how are they to be trained?

With credits from bona-fide early music groups as well as the Metropolitan Opera Company, Jennifer Lane’s unique perspective may provide a clue. In her teaching at Stanford University, Lane believes that “the idea that opera and early music are anathema to each other is ‘The Big Mistake.’ I think we have to train singers to have the necessary musical and stage skills for success, and the best way to accomplish this is through 17th- and 18th-century opera, which does require specialized vocal skills but which absolutely does not rule out singing music from later periods.”

Other voice teachers agree that there is a common ground for proper vocal technique. Ellen Hargis states that “while basic healthy technique is probably the same no matter what repertoire you sing, there are different ways of using the voice in Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque music that are not used as consistently in later opera and art song. It’s also important to work with early instruments to understand this. Singing in a light, inflected style with modern strings results in a game of vocal hide-and-seek, while singing with full, constant vibrato and uninflected text is equally incompatible with the transparent sound of Baroque violins, theorboes, or harpsichords.” She makes another interesting point: “Often I find that modern singers who come to me for coaching in Baroque style are just looking for permission to use a variety of sounds in new ways. As long as they are singing with proper support and healthy technique, why not? We’re just talking about expanding our vocal vocabularies.”

Similarly, Eric Mentzel, at the University of Oregon, speaks of cultivating good vocal technique and then teaching various options to students based on repertoire affinity. “Making the appropriate sound for early music is largely a matter of the choices
Early Music Specialists Get Along?

you make and your own inclination. For some singers, certain choices come more naturally than others, or are more aesthetically appealing, and I think that is one factor that governs what kind of music they are most drawn to.”

He sees a big change over the past 10 years in the ability of singers to adjust to various repertoires and the public’s willingness to legitimize early music. Mentzel rejoices that “a number of singers who first made a name in the early music world have crossed over to mainstream operatic careers.” Perhaps what Mentzel and others are noticing is that Baroque music is no longer considered a specialty area and that one can hear sprightly phrasing, decent trills, and improvised ornaments even at major opera houses. Does early music now refer to Medieval and Renaissance repertoires?

“No one expects singers who sing Mozart and Bach well to also sing Machaut well,” Mentzel says. “I think to be prepared for a singing career nowadays, you have to be comfortable with Baroque style, but for Medieval and Renaissance music, the situation seems to be different. The earlier repertoire is still too foreign and is still the province of specialists. Perhaps the vocal demands and the aesthetic are too different, so it will always demand different singers to do it well. I guess we’ll see if that changes in the next 20 years!”

Two people who do specialize in earlier repertoires weigh in. Frederick Renz lists some of the skills he looks for in hiring professionals for Early Music New York, the group he founded in 1974: “a solid knowledge of early performance practice, plus basic vocal skills such as proficiency in sight-reading and transposition, accuracy of intonation, affinity for languages, an ability to sing effectively and accurately without vibrato, flexibility of vocal color and range, including effective use of ‘head voice,’ ‘chest voice,’ and character voices, along with a level of technical command that frees the artist to fully engage in all facets of the music-making experience—‘knowing the score’ as opposed to knowing only one’s own part.”

Benjamin Bagby, whose career has been firmly centered in the earliest vocal repertoires, bristles at the notion of special skills for early music. “If we want to mention specialized vocal skills, I feel we would do better to talk about ‘opera skills’ or ‘new music skills.’ So-called ‘early music’ skills ought to be the default – they should be every singer’s skills.” His list of characteristics, like Renz’s, would be desirable and appropriate for any communicative singer in repertoire from any era. Bagby looks for “an active sensitivity to text and language, including the relation of tone quality to language, dialect, and the tuning of vowels, the ability to envision oral traditions and make them come alive in spite of the score, the ability to adapt articulation to colleagues and to the common musical language of the repertoire being sung, the ability to listen while singing (seems simple, but you’d be surprised), the ability to sing two notes in a row that are actually related to each other, and the ability to crawl inside the utterance of a text and inhabit it as a real human being. These skills (and more) are essential.”

“The earlier repertoire is still too foreign and is still the province of specialists. Perhaps the vocal demands and the aesthetic are too different.”– Eric Mentzel

“...A level of technical command that frees the artist to fully engage in all facets of the music-making experience – ‘knowing the score’ as opposed to knowing only one’s own part.”– Frederick Renz, on what he looks for in a singer
program is continuing to develop under the direction of Ross Duffin. Voice teachers William Hite at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and Jane Bryden at Smith College, along with collegium director Robert Eisenstein, have the five-college area (which includes the two aforementioned institutions as well as Amherst, Hampshire, and Mount Holyoke Colleges) covered. The University of Oregon has tenor Eric Mentzel on the voice roster, and another tenor, James Taylor, is working with conductor Simon Carrington to develop a combination early music and choral scholar program at Yale University.

Perhaps it is pointless to seek out the ideal institutional program for all when it will always be up to the individual student to research various learning opportunities and to fashion a meaningful course of study. Baird, Lane, Hargis, and Minter all note that their early music skills were assembled from a variety of sources, not all academic. Bagby is even more explicit: “Schools can rarely give young singers the complete set of tools they will actually need in professional life. Part of the reason for this is that the most motivated students are required to jump through so many tiring, useless curriculum and examination hoops that have nothing to do with their authentic lives as artists and vocalists.”

Is there a better way? Opera singers have post-graduate possibilities in numerous Young Artist training programs, where they are gradually introduced to professional life while continuing to study and develop specific skills and tools. Perhaps the United States needs a similar program for early music singers, along the lines of William Christie’s Le Jardin des Voix in France. Until then, summer workshops, master classes, and private study will continue to supplement degree programs.

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