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What is “Singing Like Butter?”

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As a young music student, I usually responded well to descriptive, technical instruction. If a teacher told me to “curve your fingers” or “shape your lips” in a certain way, I knew what to do. However, less technical instructions frustrated me. If a teacher said, “Imagine a cool mountain breeze on your throat and sing like that.” I felt foolish and exposed, and usually responded with apprehensive, guarded expressivity.

When I first began attending choral workshops, this type of imaginative language was very popular among choir directors. A festival clinician might tell their singers, “sing like butter;” the choir would miraculously improve their legato, the conductor would be enthralled with their progress, and observers would laud the teacher’s brilliance. Determined to be like those master teachers, imagine my disappointment when, conducting a rehearsal early in my career, I told my singers to “sing like butter.” They looked at me like I was crazy and sang as poorly as they did before. I

didn’t know what to do, except to use up my last idea, which was to tell them to “sing like you are swimming in a vat of chocolate pudding.” You can probably guess what little effect that had.

David Mamet’s book *True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor* (Vintage Books, 1997) encouraged me to teach in a style I hadn’t observed at choral clinics. Mamet is a playwright, author, and film director whose famed work includes the films *Glengarry Glen Ross*, *Hoffa*, *The Untouchables*, and *Wag the Dog*. He passionately writes about how he directs actors—often using a candor many choral professionals are reticent to use so as not to offend dear colleagues. Yet, it was this candor that encouraged me, and although he is not a choral conductor, I imagine he would understand why I always found it more difficult to respond to picturesque language than to technical language.

So, here are a few Mamet quotes from *True and False* which I have considered through the lens of a choral profession-

“**Three weeks into rehearsals, the luster of the new choir season has often worn off.**”

al. I hope they spark your thinking as they did mine.

“We spend our three weeks gabbing about ‘the character’ and spend the last week screaming and hoping for divine intercession, and none of it is in the least useful, and none of it is work.”
(Mamet, *True and False*, p. 72)

What is Mamet addressing in this statement? He primarily criticizes the stage director’s time management—specifically, their choice to talk about character before teaching technical fundamentals. Choral directors can be tempted to do something similar. Three weeks into rehearsals, the luster of the new choir season has often worn off. Hard musical passages are still hard, the teaching techniques used early on don’t seem to be as effective, and the path to progress feels like a slog. It can be very alluring, for a little relief, to schedule an “off-day” (or more) to talk about a musical piece’s meaning, its historical context, its cultural context, and more.

Of course, mastering resonance, intonation, and breathing aren’t the only measures of academic success. We ought to teach all the supporting cultural context, the ethics, and worldviews; these (and similar) topics are important, and they often inspire students, boosting their interest and enthusiasm toward effortful study. But Mamet’s point can refer to a specific choral scenario where, 1) a teacher mis-ordered their rehearsal plans by delaying student-deserved technical instruction until it was impossible to absorb it, and 2) the teacher devalued students’ right to receive thorough, technical education by rationalizing that “at least students learned other important topics.” Students gain the greatest benefit from absorbing, prac-

ticing, and perfecting technical fundamentals early, after which socio-cultural instruction enriches their technical mastery and moves them toward deep understanding, ownership, and public performance.

We must never cheat our students out of the music education they deserve in favor of a socio-cultural education we might prefer to teach earlier in rehearsal. I doubt Mamet would ever say, “The play wasn’t great, but at least I taught the acting students about building community.” Don’t believe the notion that doggedly pursuing unified vowels (or any other technical feat) is elitist and secondary to a conversation about ethics. Teach the fundamentals early—breath management, vowel formation, resonance, intonation, and diction; teach the hard sections of repertoire early—the dissonances, awkward intervals, tricky chords, melismas, and extraordinarily long phrases which always want to go out of tune. And most importantly, prioritize those topics until students have achieved them to the degree that their technical knowledge and practice will percolate through subsequent instruction of important cultural, social, and related topics.

“What should happen in the rehearsal process? Two things:

- 1. The play should be blocked.*
- 2. The actors should become acquainted with the actions they are going to perform.”*

(Mamet, *True and False*, p. 72)

A stage play can be read without blocking. But there is a physical, technical component which must be imagined, sketched, communicated, and walked for the play to come to life. And it is in that rehearsal process where actors

physically learn, experience, and internalize their blocking. Mamet emphasizes that rehearsals have a primary purpose: to learn how to execute new tasks, and then to execute them. Other things can happen, but if these primary things are missing, then rehearsal hasn’t happened.

For singers, choir rehearsal can be a gathering time, community time, social studies time, and therapy time. All these things have their place and usually do happen. Yet, they ought to happen in the context of the music-making process which is the primary purpose of rehearsal. Community grows when we participate in the same activities, social studies happen as we experience and internalize the art produced by others, therapy happens when emotions are outpoured, heard, and shared in music-making, even if we are too choked up personally to contribute at the moment. Earlier in the book, Mamet writes, “The only reason to rehearse is to learn to perform the play. It is not to ‘explore the meaning of the play’...it is not to ‘investigate the life of the character...’” (Mamet, *True and False*, p. 52) Again, Mamet points stage directors toward the compelling reason to rehearse. His reminder holds true for choral directors: prioritize the technical and artistic goals of rehearsal, and the achievement in those areas will positively spill over into other desired outcomes.

“What is an action? An action is an attempt to achieve a goal. Let me say it even more simply: an action is the attempt to accomplish something. Obviously then, the chosen goal must be accomplishable. Here is a simple test: anything less capable of being accomplished than ‘open the window’ is not and can’t be an action.

You've heard directors and teachers by the gross tell you, 'Come to grips with yourself,' 'Regain your self-esteem,' 'Use the space,' and myriad other pretty phrases which they, and you, were surprised to find difficult to accomplish. They are not difficult. They are impossible. They don't mean anything. They are nonsense syllables, strung together by ourselves and others, and they mean 'Damned if I know, and damned if I can admit it.'

(Mamet, True and False, p. 72-73)

I'm pretty sure Mamet would never tell his actors to "stand like butter." A lot can be gleaned from his admonition, but his opinion as to why directors use this type of language is what stands out—that is, because they don't know what reproducible action or physical technique to command, and to avoid exposing their absent knowledge, they resort to a more mysterious coaxing.

Too often, vocal teachers do not understand enough basic physiology to know why they sing the way they do, and thereby can't instruct their singers to do anything physical. Think through a few scenarios as a singer yourself.

- What changes in the mouth differentiate the vowels [ɛ] and [e], or [ɪ] and [i]?
- To enunciate a shadow vowel after singing the word "song," what must happen with the tongue for the word to sound like [ˈsɔŋ,ɪ] and not like [ˌsɔŋˈʌ]?
- When resonantly sustaining the [n] in "amen" or the [ŋ] in "long," what laryngeal position will brighten or depress the tone?

- What tandem functions do the lips and throat play in improving the sound of the word "glad" so that when sung it sounds rich rather than grating?
- We've learned to eschew the American [r], but why? How does the tongue create the ugly "pirate r" sound? If singing the word "guard," is there a physical way to avoid singing "guarrrrrrrrd" without telling singers to "don't sing the r" (which then turns the word into sounding like "God")?

If we're honest, too often we presume Harold Hill's "Think System" (from Meredith Wilson's *The Music Man*) will magically improve our ensembles' sound. But if 70% of a choir's singers have never been taught to adjust their tongue by flattening or lifting it, or taught to leave their lips open after releasing a word, or to maintain a gently lifted sternum position, then they won't know how to do these things when told that intonation is lackluster. They need to be taught technique to produce richly nuanced tones when requested.

Regarding theatre, Mamet says, "Anything less capable of being accomplished than "open the window" is not and can't be an action." In choir, I think, he would commend instructions like "lift your tongue" and "release on the downbeat." Yet choral directors employ mysterious language all the time. There is nothing wrong with using imaginative, artistic language to help inspire artistic singing. However, if we rely on atmospheric language, our students might "luck-into" the right sound, but often won't be able to reproduce it consistently.

Mamet asks stage directors to reconsider why they tend to use this style of language; choral directors ought to as well. It may be necessary and helpful alongside of, but not divorced from, physiological instructions. But some teachers resort to this language because they don't know what technique should be executed, how to physically execute it, or how to effectively communicate that to their singers. This is what Mamet means by, "Damned if I know, and damned if I can admit it." If you struggle teaching a vocal technique, admit this to yourself, reach out and learn how, bring that knowledge back to your students, and teach them how to sing.

"As actors, we spend most of our time nauseated, confused, guilty. We are lost and ashamed of it; confused because we don't know what to do and we have too much information, none of which can be acted upon; and guilty because we feel we are not doing our job."

(Mamet, True and False, p. 5)

Choral educators can learn from Mamet's wisdom. Hopefully you can imagine singers in choir who don't know how to respond to an instruction such as "Sing like butter." At best, they will be unsure what to do. At worst, they may feel if others understand and they don't, then they are inadequate. Teach your singers tangible, reproducible vocal techniques early with clear, unambiguous language. They will be able to act on it. They will remember it. They may even pass it on to future music students of their own. ▀

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