

**THE MUSICAL EDUCATOR;  
A LIBRARY OF MUSICAL  
INSTRUCTION**

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## ON THE TEACHING OF SINGING AND THE SINGER'S ART.

BY MADAME BLANCHE MARCHESI.

### THE PARENTS.

WE may imagine the father and the mother having a talk—one example out of thousands: "I think our daughter is going to have a voice," says the father; "if that is so, I would like her to be a public singer; she might make a great name and earn a fortune, and all our friends would be jealous." "But what are we going to do?" asks the mother. Yes, what?

The girl is, say, fourteen years of age. Her parents are completely ignorant of anything connected with music or art; in fact, music has not hitherto been a subject of discussion between them. They do not go to concerts, have never even heard "The Messiah"—a fact in itself significant of much, since to go and hear the oratorios is for an English family the same as it is for a German, French, or Italian family to go and hear a favourite opera.

A friend comes to tea in the afternoon; the parents confide to him their plans, and ask his advice. He knows of a piano teacher whose brother gives singing lessons. The real profession of this "teacher" is cabinet-making, but he used to sing in the chorus of an operatic travelling company, where he heard many of the great artists. He had also taken part in some local charity concerts, and, in consequence, is regarded as an authority in musical matters. The daughter of the house should be heard by this eminent expert: *he* will say at once if she has a voice worth cultivating.

Father, mother, daughter, and friend proceed the following day to the local authority aforesaid. The "authority" tries the girl's voice, and declares that *there* is an instrument of rarest quality. The girl, he says, should start having lessons at once. "Is she not perhaps too young?" ventures the mother timidly. "Oh no!" replies the teacher, anxious to inveigle a victim, "she is just the right age; the muscles are tender, and it is better to impart the right thing on a tender muscle than on a ready-formed one!" The parents have no idea of muscles,

tender or otherwise, and are overwhelmed at hearing a scientific explanation of such deep importance; the less they have understood, the more clever they think it!

The daughter starts lessons at once. The teacher suggests that two lessons a day would be of greater value than one, not mentioning the financial benefit to his pocket, which naturally has to be considered first. The parents, willing to do anything to build up a future for their child, give their ready consent. Needless to say, the teacher is completely ignorant. The daily practices, the wrong production of the vocal tone, are followed by a complete breakdown of the girl's voice, after quite a short time. The voice has now become husky and unsteady, and the girl complains of intense pain after the lessons. The family are alarmed; they consult a specialist, who finds the throat in a very bad condition. He suggests an absolute rest. The parents are much distressed, but the idea that their child is to become a singer has firmly fixed itself in their minds and nothing will uproot it.

After the rest prescribed by the doctor, they bring their daughter back to the same teacher, and repeat to him the doctor's diagnosis. The teacher defends himself as best he can. "The girl has a delicate throat," he says; or "This is often the case at the beginning"; or "The child must have overworked at home; pupils are so tiresome"; or, "The winter has been especially damp and cold." If the teacher has a conscience, he may suggest that the girl should wait for some time before continuing her lessons; but as the pupil is usually nothing more to the teacher than the means by which he earns his living, he will advise the resumption of the lessons.

The lessons are therefore resumed. After a few weeks the girl has lost even her speaking voice! The teacher, becoming slightly alarmed, says it would be best to wait a year or two until she grows older. Then he proceeds to "explain," with more or less success, why the girl *has* lost her voice. Even now the parents do not believe that he is responsible for any of the harm done.

They decide that, while the girl is waiting, she shall be very well educated, to enable her to meet, later on, the demands of a great career; so they send her to a very superior boarding-school. At this school there are sight-reading and chorus singing classes. The girl joins them, like every one else. These classes are held without regard to the age, capacity, or health of the girls. Notes are put before them, and they have to be sung, no matter whether they are too high or too low for the individual voices. In the case of this girl whose life we are now picturing, there very soon follows an acute attack of laryngitis; and

coming home from school at the end of the term, she has to give up all hopes of ever being able to do anything with her voice—at least for the present. However, several years of complete rest bring back a few notes of her voice; new hopes are formed, and the parents send their daughter to a large town. There she tries every available teacher, until nodules are formed on her vocal chords. A great authority in the medical world, to whom she is then taken, declares that she will never again as long as she lives be able to *speak* in a clear voice. So this story comes to an end. It is not the story of a girl who had to earn her own living.

What, however, about those who have nobody in this world to give them anything, and to whom their voices mean their only fortune? The loss of that voice means the destruction of every hope of becoming famous or wealthy. Parents, if they have a gifted child, ought never to ask advice except from the highest authority in the profession chosen by or for that child. The old idea that "any one will do" for a beginner is a completely ignorant one. Parents think they can engage a great master later on, when the pupil is more advanced; but when they bring their child to the real teacher, he discovers such destruction, or such deeply rooted faults, that he has either to work long years to repair the evil done, or to declare that such reparation is impossible. The great poet Heine says somewhere, about something else:

"It is a sad old story,  
But ever will be new;  
The man to whom it happened  
It broke his heart in two."

#### THE TEACHER.

To teach singing is more serious than to teach any other thing in this world. The singing teacher can often give a voice, but he can more often take it away and break it for ever. Therefore, to teach singing aright is an infinitely important matter. The singing teacher has a mission, as noble a mission as that of the man who seeks to save souls; *he* also can save and lose souls. Whatever work you take up alone can only hurt yourself, not your neighbour. In teaching singing, you may not only rob but kill your neighbour. There are, indeed, many people who have committed suicide after having lost their voice. Nay, girls have become actually wicked, after having fought through years of toil and anguish, to suddenly realise the great decep-



tion which had been played upon them. It turns their hearts to evil. This also is suicide! When you teach a musical instrument you can also impart the wrong thing; but in that case the pupil can re-start on a new line, and learn the right thing. With singing it is different. Either the voice has been spoilt and it will take years and years of tears and pain to regain the lost treasure by the aid of the greatest expert in teaching, or it will be gone for ever!

The voice that is brought to the teacher is the joy, often the only hope for bread, of a whole family. What a task! what a great thing accomplished if the voice is well brought out! But what a crime if it is ruined! The singing teacher not only has to "place" the voice, but to cultivate it with love and patience; he has to observe the general health of his pupil; he must direct her steps, teach her to clothe and to protect herself against fatigue and cold; and all the while he must also train her soul. How can the pupil, later on, stand in front of thousands if she does not know how to behave, and how to make her appearance pleasant and interesting? Even if the arrangement of her hair is in bad taste, it must be corrected. Often a small trifle overlooked in the appearance of an artist has ruined her career. A lady singer who stands on a platform bent forward and never lifting her eyes, or one opening a mouth like a cavern, is impossible, whatever voice she may possess. And what about disagreeable or bored looks? Even "stage fright," that terrible malady of nervousness known to all who have to appear before the public—even that must not be too noticeable. The public does not want a frightened artist; the public wants to enjoy itself; and a nervous artist makes the listeners nervous. A little nervousness at the beginning of a career is naturally allowed for, but it must not dominate the whole performance; if it does, it will spoil the whole effect, artistic and otherwise. The soul of the pupil must be open to poetry, to love of beings and things; the thought must be wide-awake, else how can the singer understand the poem and the story which underlies every song or air? The horizon of her views must be widened.

I was profoundly astonished when I came to England to find that the girl who follows the ordinary school course without specialising in anything is the least educated of all the daughters of the great nations. The English girl is not taught enough; she knows a very little of some things, and nothing of many things. I always question my pupils about their studies; and my experience is that they have never learnt the things which they ought to have learnt. For

example, they do not learn universal history, natural history, science, or mythology. How can they get on without a knowledge of mythology? How can they understand paintings, sculptures, even literature? They do not learn the story of art, nor the literature of all the countries. I know that the Bible and Shakespeare are great teachers, and that a vast deal can be learnt from both, but to have read them is not enough.

The consequence of this limited education is that the fields of girls' imaginations have not been enlarged. Their moral eyesight is dim and limited; their conversation touches only a few subjects, and in life only a few things interest them. Also they very rarely read serious literature. The most stupid love stories, with an *olla podrida* of railway "literature," are the only things they are familiar with. Once a year, perhaps, they open a newspaper, and then only look up the corner where their favourite sports are reported. This is more important than it appears to be at first sight, for a girl who is not trained to appreciate serious and instructive literature will always lack depth and thoroughness. It is inevitable that this should be reflected in her art, if she chooses one, or if it chooses her. Why not put flowers in your garden? Does it not make it much more attractive?

A very difficult task for the teacher, after having "placed" a voice, is to discover the particular path which the pupil ought to follow. The discrimination of gifts is the outcome of great knowledge and experience. To make a girl sing oratorio when she is fitted for opera; to try to make a serious ballad-singer out of one whose forte is light opera, are fatal mistakes on the part of a teacher. *Knowledge* and *inspiration* form the base of the art of teaching, and it is most necessary to understand the pupil's capacity. The teacher who is impatient is *not* a teacher. We are all human beings; every one of us has moments of fatigue; but the teacher who, instead of giving the necessary explanation, becomes annoyed when a pupil asks an important question, is either ignorant or quite unfit to be a teacher. The teacher is there to impart, the pupil to take in; and if the pupil has difficulties in learning, it is the task of the teacher to overcome them. His bounden duty is to impregnate the spirit of the pupil with the truth of what he teaches—things which she must learn. In a case where the teacher recognises the utter impossibility of imparting his art to a pupil, because of the latter's want of the essential qualifications for an artist, he must have the courage to state the fact. No consideration whatever should deter the teacher from telling the truth. After all, honesty always goes furthest! One is born a dramatist, a painter, and so on; one also must be born a *teacher*.

The greatest of all gifts necessary to a singing master is that of being able to *see with his ear*.

#### THE STUDENT.

You wish to sing? Why? Because you are longing to become celebrated, or because you love money? Or do you really love art itself? Some people come to me, candidly confessing that they want to sing in order to make a little money to be able to pay the rent of their house. Others avow frankly that they want to sing because they have to earn their own living, and they prefer singing to doing anything else, as it is learnt "so quickly, and brings in so much more money at the end." One thing is certain: whatever you undertake without love—I mean love in the best sense of the word, not love of worldly matters—cannot be accomplished. It was love—love for God, for nature and art—which made the ancient painters and sculptors so great; and it is the lack of this love which makes our modern artists so hopelessly small. The old idea is replaced by the desire of making money to procure luxury. One must live, of course, and if an artist makes money by his art, well and good: it is perfectly legitimate. But to regard an art solely from the point of being able to make money out of it is absolutely to be condemned. Art is serious; the pupil who wants to play with it should give it up; it is a grave matter to become a singer.

You must first of all form your character; without that you can gain nothing, least of all a career. You must be able to dominate your passions and desires; because, if you wish to sing, you will have to give up every kind of sport and amusement, everything that tires or injures the body or hurts the voice. All physical effort, any moral or physical strain, reflects back upon the voice, for the voice is produced by a group of muscles which form a part of the body. Everything, therefore, which is done to that body affects the vocal organ. The first condition towards becoming a singer is to have general good health. Only moderate walking exercise should be taken; a little swimming, riding, or cycling will not hurt the voice, but I say a *little*. Colds are naturally to be avoided; hence to clothe carefully is an important matter. In general, the clothing of English girls should be seen to. English girls always want to appear slim (this is a fixed idea of theirs); therefore, they dress as lightly as possible. Hating warm wraps, they try to hide thick flannels under very smart dresses, which prevent a free circulation, and which they cannot take away upon entering a hot room. In this way, of course, chills are easily caught after leaving the