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Author(s): W. G. McNaught

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CLASS SINGING

SOME PRACTICAL HINTS BY

W. G. McNAUGHT.

*(Concluded from page 16.)*WHAT A CLASS SINGING TEACHER IS
EXPECTED TO DO.

It goes without saying that class singing in a school must be considered in rational relation to the whole curriculum now imposed upon schools of all grades. The most recent tendency is to look for increased attention to utilitarian bread-and-butter subjects. This tendency promises to obstruct musical training. But there are not wanting abundant and gratifying proofs of the recognition of the duty, if not the necessity, of educating (not merely of instructing) all the potential faculties of the child before attempts are made to specially direct those faculties into utilitarian channels. Everybody says, in theory at least, that we must mainly aim to educate the young how to learn. Whatever the result of the endeavours to proportion the time to be given to this or that study, it is certain that the pint pot will not hold more than a pint. With this obvious fact in mind one views with concern the increasing demands made upon the class singing teacher. Time was when the question as to who should have charge of the singing class was a matter of no particular importance. It was, and often now is, considered to be a sort of perquisite of the pianoforte teacher. But, nowadays, the ideal class singing teacher is expected to be a wonderful individual. The mere enumeration of the heads of the topics he or she is expected to deal with is sufficiently alarming.

CLASS SINGING TOPICS.

(1.) Sight-singing, time, and tune. This includes a great familiarity with theory. (2.) Ear training (recognition of scale sounds played or sung). (3.) Part-singing. (4.) Breathing and voice production. (5.) Enunciation and pronunciation. (6.) Expressive execution. (7.) The study of good music and the education of the taste.

No doubt many of the above topics overlap and can be attended to simultaneously by a vigilant teacher, but, when all is said, the task of dealing satisfactorily with such a variety of studies in about twelve hours a term is obviously an impossible one. Yet if you elect just to take off your hat to this or that topic, to shake hands with another and to cultivate the close friendship of the rest, you must be prepared to run the gauntlet of some set of critics. You may be told that while the sight-singing is eminently satisfactory the class does not get nearly enough real and good music to practise. If you spend time on "getting up" good part-music you will be told that the class should learn our fine old national or folk-songs, chiefly of the robustious sort that can be sung

"heartily." You set your class aglow with enthusiasm with "Down among the dead men" and "Twenty years off," when next day comes a frost and you are nipped by the solemn warning that this hearty singing is wholly destructive of the voice. In a duly repentant mood you now ply your class with breathing exercises and the rules of voice production and fancy you are doing good work, when next you learn with dismay that, however satisfactory the results may seem, the children's voices are being hopelessly ruined and their health injured by the wrong methods adopted. Finally comes the unkindest cut of all, in the person of a hypochondriac, who gloomily assures you that class singing is an utter mistake, root and branch, not merely because you cannot attend to individuals, but because young people should not sing at all until their voices are "settled." The children, it appears, may laugh, shriek, and shout half the day whilst at play, but they may not sing gently for half-an-hour a week under careful guidance. It is fortunate that they are permitted to eat, notwithstanding the immaturity of their internal organs.

In the end you realise that the only sensible course is to carefully consider the condition and circumstances of the class, and to resolve to give it just the musical nutriment it appears most to need and is most capable of digesting. Aim to do something well and take care to do nothing badly. Do not dissipate the energies of the class by dealing incoherently with too much at a time. At every lesson try to deal with some point that grows naturally out of the previous lesson. You cannot work from a cut and dried ideal plan taken from a book. No two classes are ever alike. Every class needs special treatment. The sagacious teacher in actual touch with the class is always adapting himself to the exigencies of the moment. Personally, I have generally found that the most economical course is to devote at the outset and for a few terms the larger proportion of the allotted time to sight-singing matters, whilst throughout jealously watching and correcting the voice delivery. The skill thus gained can then be applied to other points. Pieces, especially if in two or more parts, can, of course, be more quickly mastered where there is some sight-singing than where there is none. It is weary work for everyone if other than simple unison songs are taught by ear. So, where a teacher has anything like a free hand, I strongly recommend that about four-fifths of the earlier lessons be given to sight-singing studies.

SIGHT-SINGING.

I approach this debatable ground with some diffidence, for I should be sorry to say anything that might widen the cleavage that exists as to the use of notations and, to a lesser degree, as to methods. Considerable experience as an examiner, and I hope as an impartial observer,

has made me acquainted with the workings of a variety of methods, with the result that I feel benevolently tolerant of many ways of reaching the great ends—viz., a clear understanding of the great facts of music and a practical knowledge of the staff notation. Nothing I have come across has yet shaken my belief that the tonic sol-fa method with its notation is, on the whole, for popular class purposes, the best elementary musical educational scheme before the world. I content myself with this avowal of faith. The movable doh method applied to the staff is, of course, the same in principle, and may naturally be preferred by many who teach in middle class schools. In choosing a method beware of systems that promise too much—sight-singing-from-Wagner-while-you-wait methods and other “no difficulty” methods. The most experienced expert in school class teaching cannot get more than elementary results in sight-singing without a far greater expenditure of time than it is reasonable to expect that schools can allot to the subject. It is easy to “split the ears of the groundlings” by showy results with modulators, but real sight reading in time and tune combined and in parts, sung from printed music, is years beyond modulator work. Beware of teaching at one time a mass of theory without practice, and at another time giving practice of a kind that is really ear singing, in the hope that somehow in the future the two kinds of skill will automatically unite. It is profoundly disappointing to find that after all the recent attention given to education, otherwise sane people will go on teaching mere dead signs and suppose themselves thereby to be teaching things. It is depressing to have to believe that this kind of instruction obtains more in music teaching than in any other school subject. In these times of examinations galore it is a common thing to find young people who can answer on paper marvellous questions on theory and who can sing charmingly songs they know, but who cannot, at sight, sing an easy hymn-tune. There is a bridgeless chasm between their two acquirements. This is the natural result of the continued separation of the two studies.

The scientific sight-singing teacher must teach the musical thing first and afterwards weld it to its sign. Sight-singing involves the most exact and instantaneous appreciation of the musical meaning of a sign. The true function of theory is to vitalise; to bring to life the thing to which it has been indissolubly attached. Musical concepts and signs have, as it were, to be built into the pupil's mind. Anything short of this is a delusion and an imposture. It follows from all this that theory can only be taught slowly in the sight-singing class, and it also follows that all the teaching directed to the cohesion of thing and sign should be incisive, abundant, and always

with a clear objective. The old adage that an ounce of practice is worth a pound of theory contains a wholesome truth.

CLASS MANAGEMENT AND SOME TEACHING RULES.

Every other power of a class singing teacher is sterilised if he does not possess skill in class management. I once offended an eminent musician by saying that a school singing class could be better taught by a good Board school teacher than by most professional musicians trained in musical conservatoires. It is as stale to say that a musical artist is not necessarily a good teacher as it is to say that teachers are born and not made. But in this connection we have to go farther and assert that many music teachers, who train individual executants admirably, are utter failures when they attempt to deal with a large class. The power to gain spontaneous attention and to seize the mood and immediate need of a class is an instinct.

The teacher, by his manner, must show his interest in, and enthusiasm for his work, and his earnest desire to succeed. He must make it clear that he is fully aware of his pupils' difficulties and is willing to be patient with their struggles and inevitable mistakes. The happiest discipline in class management is that born of an absorbed interest in the lesson. A class is a mirror to the teacher and the reflection is often not flattering. Unless the pupils have acquired bad habits elsewhere, much inattention is generally to be accounted for by the teacher's own manner, and therefore should not be vicariously censured. Righteous indignation at a superfluity of naughtiness is needful occasionally, but always provided that you can give vent to it without making a fool of yourself. Some teachers are effervescent almost throughout a lesson, and they complain that class singing is very exhausting—and one can well believe it. Discipline is maintained by startling smashes of a stick on a desk, with the object apparently of stimulating the pupils by reflex action to imagine how it would be if the blow fell elsewhere. What with the disciplinary whacks, the noisy beating of time with foot and stick, and the shouting of “one,” “two,” “three,” “four,” a singing class may be a pandemonium. In such cases a cynic may well enquire where the elevating and refining power of music comes in. As a matter of fact, attention cannot be coerced with any good result. An adroit change of topic will often give new life to an inattentive, sluggish class. Musical study happily affords many such changes of topic.

A lesson must fit the pupils' capacity. It may be below this capacity, but it must not be beyond it. Teaching on a set plan is all very well for beginners in teaching, but the plan must be constantly varied by circumstances. Most of the best teaching is an inspiration born of a realisation of the momentary, and probably

unexpected psychologic mood of the class. A sudden and special interest is manifested and you gladly find your opportunity of meeting it. This situation makes demands upon the ready resource of a teacher and calls for a capacity to give an incisive lesson on any point at any moment. Experience must thus store the mind. The prepared plans of young teachers are often far too elaborate. They map out for a term what the old hand will spread over a year. The great art is to teach a few connected points thoroughly well, and by varied presentment and practice to maintain interest. Recognise when your class is weary of a point and refrain from pressing it farther for the present lesson. Encourage pupils to ask and to answer questions. Let them clearly understand that the object of your asking them a question is not necessarily to elicit a correct answer, but a desire to know the state of their minds for your guidance. If you want a correct answer to your question it is always easy to provide it in the question, as teachers often do in the stress of showing off pupils. The teacher says: "Don't you know that there are three flats in the signature of E flat major?" and commends an affirmative answer. Sincere, unprompted answers will probably make you wince inwardly, and, it may be hoped, induce a merciful view of the teaching of other teachers whose pupils you may have to examine. In teaching things—*i.e.*, musical facts—give abundant singing practice until the point is easily executed and the mind saturated through the ear. In teaching notation take special pains to educate the eye, and be always planning to make the two lines meet. The signs of musical notation are arbitrary; there is nothing about them that is self-explanatory. Their intimate association with actual musical conceptions is, therefore, a growth. Be extraordinarily careful to secure the expectant attention of your class at the moment when thing and sign are to be rivetted. Note and avail yourself of the keen interest a class will manifest if one of their number is summoned forward to point out or to write something on the blackboard. The most indolent will watch the process with an absorbed attention you would be only too glad to experience when *you* write on the board. Everything taught should, if possible, grow out of something that has already been taught. Only in this way can you utilise the apperceptive laws of the mind's method of development. Isolation of points leads to confusion and forgetfulness.

I have said that the proper object of the class is the education of the individual. In choir training, you shape the mass and suppress the individual; in class training, you should entirely distrust the mass and should be everlastingly thinking of the individual. The wonderful quickness of the working of the imitative faculty in choral performance has often been remarked. I have sometimes tested it by getting three-

fourths of a class to turn their backs to the platform and to sing what the remaining fourth sing from a blackboard exercise. The result is a practical unanimity. Obviously, pupils who thus imitate do not practise the conception of sounds from symbols, but merely the art of quickly picking up what they hear. It thus becomes possible and is really a common thing for a musically endowed pupil to attend a singing class for years without acquiring more independent reading power than should have been acquired in a few months. How to circumvent the anti-sight singing tendency of this faculty is the constant concern of the experienced class singing teacher. Abundant individual performance in the class is the only remedy. This, it must be confessed, is often very difficult to get, because pupils are generally reluctant to sing alone, and when they are persuaded to do so their performance is far from natural because it is paralysed by diffidence. Nothing else in class management tests more severely the moral power of a teacher than the situation now to be faced. If the class is to accomplish its highest purpose every device must be utilised to secure conditions that will encourage pupils to sing alone and in a natural manner. In the early stages give great credit to all who sing alone, whether they sing correctly or badly. Let it be understood that the effort is honourable and that the mere result is of secondary importance. Those most frightened at the sound of their own voices may be coaxed to try a monotone time exercise. Explain that it is a form of conceit to be so fearful of failure before others. Allow no ridicule at failure. Ask those who show a disposition to ridicule to stand up and do better. Let all the individual tests be of the easiest possible description. When the pupils are thus thoroughly persuaded that individual effort, however inefficient, will be honoured, the teacher will begin to have a real command of the class and will be able to secure the happiest possible lessons and the most abiding results. The vista opened by the establishment of the practice of individual performance is immense. You feel agreeably conscious that you are really educating. The reaction of individual upon individual is now incalculable for good. The means of varying practice and maintaining interest are now increased tenfold. A "dry" exercise, of no value as real music, gains the fascination of a game now that it is a problem to be solved by individual endeavour.

Much more could be written, but as I am not writing a book, I must refrain from adding further to these unpretentious hints.

"AFTER learning to reason, you will learn to sing; for you will want to. There is so much reason for singing in this sweet world, when one thinks rightly of it."—*John Ruskin*.