

Methodological Specifics of Teaching the Art of Opera Singing to Students with Visual Impairments and Musculoskeletal System Disorders

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ABSTRACT

The present article outlines some theoretical and methodological issues and major practical aspects of promoting the vocal, technical and artistic development of young opera singers with visual impairments and musculoskeletal system disorders. To conduct the research, the authors applied the method of inductive reasoning and the integrated approach within a multidisciplinary context. Being teachers of the subdepartment of opera singing at the Russian State Specialized Academy of Arts, the authors describe the most effective and field-proven methods of practical work with young singers with disabilities in the opera singing class.

Keywords: Opera singing, Teaching solo singing, Visual impairments, Musculoskeletal system disorders.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Russian State Specialized Academy of Arts (former State Specialized Institute of Arts) is a higher education institution that has existed in Moscow since 1991.

The main activity of the Academy is providing artistic education and training for disabled people with different disorders through reverse inclusion [1]. Inclusive education (inclusion) implies the inclusion of learners with disabilities in the environment of healthy learners. The focus of the Academy is reverse inclusion by means of balancing the number of students of the two categories (students with disabilities and healthy students), which makes it a unique educational institution not only in the country, but also in the world.

The Academy has three departments: Music, Theatre and Fine Arts. At the department of Music, there are subdepartments of instrumental performance, folk musical instruments, sound engineering, the theory and history of music, opera singing, and opera and symphonic conducting.

The founders and first teachers at the subdepartment of opera singing were the soloists of the Bolshoi Theatre: Lev Kuznetsov, People's Artist of Russia, and Lidia Kovalyova, Honoured Artist of the Russian SFSR [2]. Since 2015, the subdepartment has been chaired by Professor Peter Gluboky, People's Artist of Russia. During the existence of the subdepartment, its teachers have developed and tested unique methods for teaching students with visual impairments and musculoskeletal system disorders.

The teachers of the Academy constantly develop their teaching skills and update their knowledge of methods and approaches to teaching. They regularly interact to share teaching experience through demonstration lessons; additionally, there is an established system of peer counselling for teachers and peer monitoring of the educational process. Teaching activity is aimed at training competitive professionals who due to health condition may need transport assistance, but never need leniency towards the results of their professional activity.

2. METHODOLOGICAL SPECIFICS OF TEACHING THE ART OF OPERA SINGING TO STUDENTS WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS AND MUSCULOSKELETAL SYSTEM DISORDERS

Training to become a musical artist is an extremely labour-intensive multi-stage process. Professional musicians study at music schools in early childhood, then vocational schools, and finally, at higher educational institutions. In total, they spend 15-16 years to enter the profession, having 3-5 hours of daily independent practice in addition to studying the necessary musical disciplines. In fact, it is talent that gives strength and energy to work so extensively and diligently.

Disabled students of the subdepartment of opera singing of the Music department of the Russian State Specialized Academy of Arts are predominantly those having severe multisystem defects - visual impairment related to the cerebral palsy group of disorders, and severe cerebral palsy aggravated by somatic diseases, i.e. disabled people of a socio-economic group that needs constant state support. Due to specificity of students, in most cases it is impossible to unify methodological techniques and approaches. Sensor and locomotor disorders are usually associated with serious somatic, psychoneurological and emotional problems. Thus, professional education of students with such health disorders consists not only in developing the necessary knowledge and skills, but also in maintaining their health.

The process of teaching solo academic singing to students with visual impairments or musculoskeletal system disorders, in general, is not entirely different from teaching healthy students, but has a number of specific features. When starting teaching solo singing to a partially sighted or totally blind student with no concomitant neurological conditions, it is necessary to understand that vision problems do not interfere with singing, and the result of the work can reach the level achieved in similar conditions by students without visual impairments.

Starting lessons with a student having musculoskeletal system disorders, in particular cerebral palsy disorders, it is essential to take into account the specifics of the disease and, possibly, to alter a grading scale for assessment of intermediate results, since in some cases, at the start, certain

disease patterns slow down the processes of professional skills development.

Teaching students with visual impairments and musculoskeletal system disorders has two specific components: psychological and technical. It should be mentioned that in most cases, the issues of psychological adaptation take precedence over technical difficulties. A teacher having classes with a disabled student, should be as demanding of them as of a student without a disability, but should not forget about objective difficulties associated with their health condition. Greater time input or other investments do not mean lower intermediate and final results [3]. In addition, what stimulates good results in terms of increasing motivation is inclusion of a disabled student in professional competition with other students.

3. METHODOLOGICAL TECHNIQUES

The musical material used to develop and improve singing voice includes exercises, vocalizing and music pieces with lyrics. Respected vocal teachers and methodologists highlight the significance of developing vocal technique [4]. If underestimated in the process of educating and training, it will certainly stifle performing creativity and will pose an obstacle to conveying composer's design. Nevertheless, the improvement of vocal technique is inseparable from the general cultural and intellectual development of a young musician. The singing voice expresses music, and it is through musical exercise that the important connection between technique and performance is developed [5].

3.1 Vocal Exercises

Having determined the nature of voice defects in young singers with visual impairments or musculoskeletal system disorders, a teacher is recommended to relate the methods of their correction with specific physiological changes caused by the disease. Starting work with a visually impaired student, it is of the utmost importance to know the danger of increased intracranial pressure for them, since it is inevitable in the process of singing, and to know what physical activity is allowed and what is against medical advice [6]. It should be borne in mind that intracranial pressure increases as the pitch of singing rises. In class, it is recommended to regularly check with the student whether they feel dizzy or have a headache. In

some cases, it is better to avoid exercises with body bends, squats, etc.

When teaching a student with sensor and locomotor disorders, it is necessary to remember that such impairments are often associated with hypo- or hypertonia. Apart from singing classes, these students need general health-promoting activities (recommended by doctors). Special attention should be paid to the hypertonic manifestations of the disease.

It is important to take into consideration that in some cerebral palsy related diseases students' ability to concentrate is limited to 20-25 minutes. In this case, a class should be divided in two parts for student to have rest or change activity for not less than 30 minutes. Moreover, in such cases, regularity and frequency of classes is required, since another manifestation of the disease can be difficulties with memorizing and reproducing new information [7].

The set of vocal exercises that has been selected with the account of individual psychophysiological characteristics of a student should remain unchanged at the initial stage of training. When a relationship of trust has been established between a teacher and a student, it is allowed to introduce new exercises. Sometimes memorizing a simple exercise can cause unexpected difficulties for a student with a disability. If it happens so, it is recommended to do it at a slow pace, in parts, to the piano, etc. If this does not stimulate memorizing, the exercise should be replaced. Meanwhile, it is necessary to explain to a student that the individual approach in practicing solo singing implies selecting musical material (vocal exercises) that are both useful and comfortable for each particular student.

3.2 Muscle Techniques

A variety of muscle techniques in vocal training is endless. These movements, often paradoxical, come from life and singing practice. Some of them may seem ridiculous, but they are widespread and have proven effective.

Due to the peculiarities of how the blind and visually impaired perceive information and their great ability for sensual control, the demonstration and explanation of muscle techniques aimed at improving their performance is one of the most effective ways of influencing voice, along with auditory perception [8]. However, for certain diseases, some physical activity is against medical advice, so before introducing any techniques related,

for example, with bends, it is necessary to make sure they are safe for a visually impaired student.

When planning to use certain muscle techniques with a visually impaired or totally blind student, it is advisable to find out the degree and age of vision loss. According to our observations, those who got totally blind in infancy or at birth are fundamentally different in terms of sensation of themselves (their body) from those who got the condition at the age of 5 or 6. This difference is expressed in facial features, the position of the body and head, gestures, etc. Those blind since infancy or birth often keep their heads slightly bent forward. In such cases, the traditional technique of "singing while standing against the wall" can aggravate the situation, adding unnecessary tension to the muscles of the neck. Good results can be achieved if a student is asked to direct the sound of their voice to the wall in front of them, focus on its reflection, and control the position of the head. The distance to the wall is individual for each student. If there is some residual vision, a lamp can be used: it is put as high as necessary, and a student must sing "to the light". A singer themselves should learn to control the position of the head while singing, without prompts from the teacher. Quite often when concentrated, the totally blind swing the upper part of their bodies back and forth, less often - right and left. This habit can be eradicated if to regularly put the student with their back to the back of a chair, so that they rest their lower back on it and thus feel the extra movements of their body. When using muscle techniques in vocalization, it is recommended to pay special attention to their correct performance by the blind and visually impaired. With the permission of the student, the teacher is to correct movements, the shape mouth opening, etc.

3.3 Demonstration in Voice

The imitation principle "sing the way I do" comes from the Old Italian school and is still widely applied [9]. It has some disadvantages, for instance, imitation of some negative elements inherent in any performance. However, it also has a number of unquestionable advantages, in particular, when working with the blind and visually impaired. The sensitive auditory perception of the visually impaired allows them not only to immediately reproduce the technique shown in voice, but also to remember it at the first attempt and apply it later. In some cases, it is recommended to offer a blind student to relate to tactile perception in addition to

the auditory one, by putting their hands on the teacher's breath area, neck, face, etc., if necessary.

The demonstration technique is highly effective, but places extra responsibility on the demonstrating teacher. If their own vocal technique is imperfect, and the voice has defects (including age-related ones), a blind or visually impaired singer is sure to reproduce them in full.

3.4 Verbal Explanation

Any of the methods of influencing a student's vocal apparatus should be accompanied by verbal explanation and comments. Words are used to set goals, formulate tasks, and supplement the auditory impressions and movements when using muscle techniques [10].

In order to achieve the intended result, the terms used by the teacher should be understood by students, formulations should be short and clear. Using verbal explanation, it is important to make sure that the teacher and students understand the vocal phraseology in the same way. A blind singer can literally understand the suggestion to use "belly breathing", for instance, and can become confused when faced with physiological difficulties. Whereas, understanding the anatomy behind abdominal breathing, they will be able to do it right.

4. CONCLUSION

When teaching disabled students, it is extremely important to take into account their physical abilities. A range of musculoskeletal system diseases are associated with muscular dystrophy, decreased or increased muscle tone, and nerve conduction disorders, so a teacher should be very careful when determining the type of voice and choosing musical material. Sometimes, in order to maintain health, it is better to train a lyric baritone, rather than a tenor.

The objectives of training young singers include the development of necessary professional skills, harmonious development of their personality, the development of musical and artistic knowledge through increasing the general cultural level, and the formation of an aesthetic worldview (a sense of beauty) [11].

The Russian State Specialized Academy of Arts has over two decades of practical experience of working with disabled students having different disorders. The unique methods and educational programs developed at the Academy have proven

effective, since they focus not on lowering standard, but on balanced distribution of study load and specific presentation of educational material. We are absolutely convinced that reducing requirements undermines the educational process and discriminates unfairly against people with disabilities, their intellectual and creative potential.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Irina Brodskaya-Karelina set the goals and objectives of the research; Peter Gluboky selected reference materials appropriate for the goals and objectives of the research; Ekaterina Kovalyova developed the research methodology; Elena Klimenko structured the obtained results and made conclusions.

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