

Teaching Opera Singing to Visually Challenged Students

As a Way of Sociocultural Rehabilitation

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Abstract—The Russian State Specialized Academy of Art is the unique university where physically challenged students with various nosological diagnoses can get fine arts, music and theatre higher education. Having accumulated more than 25-year-experience of practical work with people with vision, hearing and motor disabilities as well as achievements of national and foreign pedagogy, the academic teaching staff has defined the most efficient ways of special needs appropriate practices and social rehabilitation for physically challenged students, including children, by means of art. Being a vocal professor, Chair of Vocal Studies and Opera, the author of the article discusses special strategies and approaches for teaching blind and visually impaired students, focuses on psychophysical peculiarities of vocal and technical skill development of visually challenged singers.

Keywords—*Physically challenged students; Opera singing; Inclusive education*

I. INTRODUCTION

Generally, visually challenged students' voice training doesn't not differ much from the one of their peers without vision disability. Starting to teach blind and partially sighted students a vocal teacher needs to understand that sight problems do not affect singing and the result may be the similar as with their sighted peers under similar conditions.

II. PECULIARITIES OF TEACHING BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED SINGERS

Working with visually challenged students, it's reasonable to single out two major aspects, psychological and technical. It should be mentioned that in most cases questions of psychological adaptation prevails over those of technical difficulties.

Of course, it's essential to match routine life to disabled people's abilities, but more important thing is to make them live full and productive lives, minimize their need for external assistance, help them learn to manage their lives by themselves.

Guided by different motives teachers often reduce requirements and oversimplify tasks for their disabled students. Meanwhile many psychologists mark that elder

children in the family can achieve more in life than younger, because they have a wider range of responsibilities and are often asked to help, etc. The stricter requirements are set for children, the more future achievements can be expected from them. Blind and partially sighted students should be taught in the same demanding way as their sighted peers are, with taking into account objective difficulties related to disability issues of the former. Time and other expenses doesn't imply poorer intermediate and final results. Inclusion of a physically challenged student in professional achievement-oriented competition with the others gives fruitful results in motivation development.

It's essential for a visually challenged singer to develop Braille writing and reading skills. Using auditory channels for learning is definitely easier, but often results in mistakes in a musical text. Besides, Braille notes allow to a visually challenged musician to accumulate and quickly reproduce from memory the repertory stretching beyond popular, easy-to-audit musical works [3].

Academic music programs for blind and visually impaired students and those for sighted students should match at the appropriate learning stages.

It's common knowledge that some recognized vocal teachers and singers always place emphasis on developing the ability to freely relax muscles, studying techniques of singing and on the right adjustment of the singer's whole organism to his voice [1]. In practice, underestimation of these issues hampers revealing creative imagination of the performer, as well as conveying the meaning of the musical composition being performed. The performing technique should be anyway focused on, but not being a goal in itself. Creativity in music performance becomes possible only when bringing artistic and technical building blocks together. Improving of student's vocal technique is inseparable from his cultural and intellectual development [5].

The first condition of fruitful learning is attention, its defining and enhancing activity of an individual. It can be voluntary and automatic, the former being formed as a result of the influence of a commitment, duty, etc., the latter being influenced by interest raised by the immediate impression. The mechanism of attention is the same in both cases, but in

III. HIGHER EDUCATION AS A MEANS OF SOCIOCULTURAL REHABILITATION OF PHYSICALLY CHALLENGED PERSONS

the first case it is directed by will, in the second one- by interest. Pedagogical process should involve voluntary attention, as automatic attention is occasional and not effective in terms of professional activity.

Interest should also arise when working with voluntary attention, being caused by well-planned, organized and goal-oriented learning process. Specified current aim and tasks stimulate voluntary attention and turn amateur activities into pre-professional and professional. There are two types of voluntary attention – focused and divided. The former involves a minimal field of vision, with the individual's consciousness concentrating on a limited part of an object. The latter implies that the individual's consciousness is also focused on particular details, but it can view the whole object and its environment and, if necessary, can concentrate on other parts of the object. It's necessary that both types of attention be engaged in effective creative vocal performance. If only focused attention is involved in working on technically difficult elements (parts) of a composition, the musical meaning almost fades away, turning the whole work into just an exercise. It's reasonable to rotate working on technically difficult elements with singing the composition from beginning to end without any stops, thus involving divided attention [2].

A vocal teacher should remember about the combination of technical and artistic building blocks, as when performing a musical work from beginning to end the musical meaning is more vivid, though it's rather difficult to hold a vocal student's attention on the main idea of the composition at the initial stage. From the very beginning a vocal teacher should draw students' attention to the main idea of a composition, taking into account that visually challenged persons may not be able to construct mental images, but have a keen sense of smell and touch and the muscle memory. When working on emotional nuances a vocal teacher needs to provide familiar analogies, including those from their personal experience, recommend reading resources (Braille books, audio books), trying not to narrow down the explanations to emotions of everyday life. Emotionality of everyday life is reflective and emerges under the influence of external circumstances, often not being subject to will. Emotionality in creative activity should be in tune with the intention of a singer and appear as appropriate. During a performance conscious processes should not be displaced by emotions, inspiration and artistic implementation.

Inspiration of a singer is the result of a hard, scrupulous work leading to a harmonious, emotional and highly polished performance. The majority of blind and visually impaired singers have a remarkable musical intuition. It is a special gift of a performer which needs to be developed further.

Visually challenged persons are often inert by nature, so their teacher should encourage their self-education and comprehensive development, available sport activities, listening to radio, reading. etc. A limited area of thought can strongly impede their professional development.

Ethical, political and economic changes occurring in the Russian society today, reframing of some long-held views and attitudes are outlining the significance of ethical and educational aspects in each individual's life ever more clearly.

Social and moral discrimination of physically challenged persons, society's absence of willingness to solve problems of their labor, everyday life and leisure increase their and their families' alienation and aloofness, which is tending to become their internal attitude passing on from adults to children.

At present it's critically important to overcome their social detachment, inactivity and seeking to segregate, as well as to reveal and develop their creative abilities, meet their moral and education requirements, strengthen their confidence in social significance. It brings into focus development of motivation, involving values, attitudes and interests. One of the most effective ways of increasing their social status and develop sense of security is getting professional education.

Nowadays, the problem of physically challenged persons' integration into the major spheres of life of our society being highly prioritized, the modern Russian educational system for children and youth with special educational needs faces inevitable changes. Implementation of inclusive education into the educational system demands developing new integrated innovation strategies. Inclusive education for children and youth implies a comprehensive set of measures which includes material and technical equipment of an educational institution, training for special education teachers, special programs for facilitating adaptation of disabled people in educational institutions and leisure center, as well as a large amount of work on getting children with disabilities involved in inclusive learning.

In the 1950s-1960s the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) created a network which comprised specialized boarding schools and production centers for handicapped persons, which actually separated them from people without disabilities and eventually built a psychological barrier between them.

Sociocultural rehabilitation by means of art as a way of integration of physically challenged persons into the modern society is one of the most significant issues of rehabilitation activity. This range of measures aimed at helping those handicapped develop skills for promoting their cultural interests and meeting requirements brings positive changes in their patterns of life and fuller integration into the society due to their increased self-sufficiency.

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