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DA CAPO RECONSTRUCTIONS: TIME AND CHANCE¹

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In June of 2000 I took early retirement from the Harvard Graduate School of Education in order to pursue—I should say, rekindle—my life long vocation as a classical singer. In my twenties and thirties I sang professionally in opera, oratorio, and recitals in Canada, South America, Europe, and the United States. Gradually, under the pressures of an academic career, by the time I was forty, singing had taken a back seat, though I continued to perform in lecture/recitals and the occasional oratorio, but it was a holding action at best with no clear focus. Graduate studies earlier on in the philosophy of science at Indiana University had been a deceptive experience, in a positive way, if only because it allowed me to combine my philosophical interests with study and performance in the Indiana University Opera Theatre. Music was my doctoral minor. Nobody questioned it.

It was a grand, challenging time for me intellectually and artistically. My thesis advisor, the late Norwood Russell Hansen, was not only a philosopher and theoretical physicist but also a concert trumpeter with a degree from Juilliard. It seemed to him, and to me, the most natural thing to pursue musical and philosophical interests to the hilt. Most of our conversations about, say, concept formation in the sciences or the logic of discovery were accompanied by Bach or Handel on the stereo in the background followed by raucous debate over the great voices of the time: Bergonzi or Del Monaco, Tebaldi or Callas? Fiercely competitive in philosophical debate, though always with a humorous touch, Hanson could as easily switch from modal logic to allegory in the art of William Blake or to the pros and cons of equal *versus* mean temperament in music. He encouraged cultural and historical breadth as well as analytical depth—a rarity among academics. Only later did I discover how insular and narrowly blinkered lesser academics in

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career frenzy could be. Specialisation and professionalism were the watchword in the 70s and 80s, and “dabbling” in other disciplines viewed askance. Suffice to say that as I gained momentum as a philosopher in the academic market place, I lost it as a singer. Hence my decision to redress the imbalance, if belatedly in late middle age.

The decision no sooner made, I was beset by a host of doubts: Was I too old to start over? Could I ever regain a measure of my former vocal ability? Had I procrastinated too long? Can one revitalise atrophied muscle systems after a long lay off? Do the vocal cords grow brittle and inflexible with age like rubber bands in the sun? Could I overcome the shakes of public exposure? Could I endure the hard training and inevitable disappointments? After all, I had been through it all before, I knew what I was getting into, but at age 61 when most singers have either quit or thinking of it? Again, suffice to say that after auditioning for Mark Pearson, formerly Head of the Voice Faculty at the New England Conservatory of Music, I was reassured. He said that the voice was intact with a good hard top; that I had acquired a few bad habits and quirks, but nothing that could not be ironed out over time and effort. He also said that at any age “habits of the spirit” were often more difficult to overcome than any limitations of the tissues. Even the young are afflicted with those.

I’ve reflected on that remark many times over the past three years of “paying the little daily tax”—William James’ phrase to describe the discipline and determination to develop or retain complex skills.² I’ve paid the little daily tax and am gratified if not totally satisfied with the results. Shortfalls are inevitable, of course. My top voice is still insecure at times as is my negotiation of the *passagio*, the break in the voice where it tends to snap into a thin falsetto. On the other hand, my renderings of Schumann’s *Dichterliebe* or Handel’s *Messiah*, for example, are interpretive improvements over the past, the wisdom of age yielding at least that dividend.

Still, disturbing questions of general educational import came to mind over the three year span of this odyssey. How can we know that the regimen we have undertaken is for the best? What effects will it have on our lives and potential? What is the price (the sacrifices, the risks) of retooling oneself with the best of intentions? What personality factors may undermine our best efforts? To what extent may we be misleading ourselves? How does one avoid delusion, what checks are there on foolish ambition? In short, what is the down side of a personal/professional

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makeover at any age? That is the central question I will address, less to discourage risk-taking than to render it transparent, even plausible.

To that end, I will explore just one aspect of the experience of redevelopment, what Dewey called the “reconstruction of experience”,³ with attention to the role of personality, ingrained habits, and judgement in that reconstruction. Even as new opportunities and horizons emerge, serious risks may also be incurred, personal limitations confronted, dreams deflated, enough to discourage anyone from starting over, particularly late in the game. But, as mentioned, youth is no less liable to such risks and disappointments. Hubris, false leads, miseducation, egotism, even fashion, can thwart the best of plans. Let us start with fashion.

Take, for example, the tenor voice (I am a tenor). The tenor voice is a cultural construct emerging over time. The sound to which we are so accustomed of a Bjoerling, Pavarotti, or Domingo with their ringing top notes was not always the historical norm. It evolved from an earlier (18th, early 19th century) style of singing in which the tenor was relatively obscure, consigned to comic roles, and seldom sang high from the chest but instead floated top notes above a high G into the head and supported falsetto. Tenors were no competition for the castrati of that era with their remarkable ranges and endless *fioritura* ornamentation, especially to an age that (androgynously) equated the highest voices to male virility and heroism. Moreover, young castrati challenged even sopranos on their own ground in female roles. As Henry Pleasants observes, “Although tenors were a common fixture in eighteenth-century *opera buffa*, it was Rossini who was the first to capitalise on this vocal range for *opera seria*. It can fairly be said that he was the one who released the tenor, and the bass, too, from the shadow of male and female sopranos and male contraltos [castrati]”.⁴ As a matter of performance fashion, the familiar tenor voice as we know it today evolved along with opera itself from an earlier, declamatory, florid singing style.

Two Frenchmen, Adolphe Nourrit (1802-1839) and Gilbert-Louis Duprez (1806-1896), stood competitively at the divide between the old and new styles of singing for tenors with tragic consequences for the former. Nourrit’s is a story of vocal reconstruction against the grain, a sadly apt case study of a late make-over gone wrong. He was a consummate master of the older, French style of florid, modulated singing with declamatory emphasis upon the dramatic

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authenticity of the role, in effect, a singing actor for whom Rossini, Donizetti, Meyerbeer and others composed more roles than any other tenor before or since. When, after a brilliant ten-year career in Italy, Duprez burst on the scene at the Paris Opera in April 1837 singing high B-flats and Cs from the chest (*ut de poitrine*), Nourrit's days as *primo uomo* were numbered. Rather than share the spotlight with Duprez, he resolved to follow Duprez's example, go to Italy and remake himself into an Italian tenor. In fact he did, but at enormous cost to his art and person. Just as not all potentials are positive, not all reconstructions are salutary.

2

Henry Pleasants in his book, *The Great Tenor Tragedy*, focuses on the psychological and artistic torment of Nourrit. With Nourrit's story and my own experience in mind, I will focus on what it means to attempt to make oneself over as a singer for good or ill. Many of my previously published works deal with self-reconstruction generally as an inevitable consequence of education and training, usually with a positive outcome; but there is also a dark side when such efforts are misdirected whether by vanity, false ambition, or bad teaching. I will come back to Nourrit's story, but for the moment let us focus on the kind of piece-meal analysis that goes into the work of vocal reconstruction as well as the dynamic of it. Lifted verbatim from a lesson tape, the following excerpt illustrates how turning points in reconstruction occur and the importance of teacher-student rapport (not to mention a sense of humour) in capitalising on such moments.

On 31 January 2003, in Steinert Hall, Boston. Mark Pearson and I had just got to the *mesa di voce* exercise, one that builds from a diminuendo to crescendo to diminuendo on a series of vowels (Nu—oh—ah—e—i) on a single note up to and above the *passagio*: < > on F, F sharp, G, etc. It's a classic training exercise that any singer will recognise.

Mark: "Ah, Vernon, never sing a straight tone. Don't allow so much breath pressure that the tone is deprived of its vibrato. Your 'oo' (u) and 'o' (oh) were laser straight, and it doesn't need to be that way. [Pause, Mark shaking his head side to side and smiling in sudden remembrance.] Oh, god, it used to be—like years ago when I was in high school—I grew to be this height [6'4"] when I was fourteen, and I weighed 135 pounds. I played first chair viola in the school orchestra and making straight 'A's. Result of all that, of course, all the boys hated me. And I just *prayed*

that it would rain on days we had gym so we wouldn't have to go outside and play baseball [laughter], because, *because* I would be the last one chosen, because I was the worst player. And then I was always made to be the catcher”.

VAH: “Oh, hell!”

Mark: “And those boys were so mean to me”.

VAH: “Oh, yeah, teen age boys can be . . . “

Mark: ““OK, Pearson’, one of them would say, ‘I’m going to really *burn it in*’, and he would throw the ball as hard as he possibly could, so that it would hurt my hand—for the piano and viola. They all knew that. *So, I don’t want you to burn it in!* [laughter] Ease up on those straight tones. Your crescendo, let it vibrate right along the way. [I did it again.] Perfect! I used to let you get away with that, because you were not very secure in your higher range or over the *passagio*. So that you were holding on locally or laryngeally somehow. That was OK for the time being, but it isn’t anymore, because you are singing very, very well indeed. [Pause] Ah, you understand, don’t you, the fact that the vibrato in the singing voice is perfectly natural?”

VAH: “Yes, I mean . . .”

Mark: “And why is that, the natural oscillation of the sound? “

VAH: “Ah, well, the vibration of the vocal chords by the air passing through them? “

Mark: “But why do they vibrate? Why does that happen?”

VAH: “Ummm, don’t know”.

Mark: “Well, it’s an interesting thing. It is because of the nature of nerve innervation, not enervation, and there is a principle involved in the delivery of the nervous system to muscles. It’s called *diadochosinesis*. It means that the message delivered is not a direct but indirect or alternating current. So the vibrato in the human singing voice is a natural phenomenon. A straight tone is not. A straight tone implies some tamping that is preventing the natural oscillation of the muscle tissues. I guess you could call it electronic impulse, and of course, it goes enormously fast”.

VAH: “Would that then account for the different vibrato rates of different singers?”

Mark: “To some extent, yes. A lot of that is accountable by the physical condition of the muscles that the message is being delivered to. Now in my case, I have—and this is true of a lot of older people—my voice is a bit lower now than when I was singing. Ah, and so, the vibrato is slower than it was. Now that doesn’t mean that the message is being delivered more slowly. It has to do with the fact that the tissue to which the message is delivered is bigger and thicker and has less tonus in it. And a lot of that is also conditioned by such things as whatever medication one is taking. I used to be able to knock off a falsetto tone immediately, instantly. I can’t do that anymore. Earlier today it was embarrassing to hear me hooting out, but it comes back. Now, again!”

We repeated the *messa di voce* exercise.

Mark: “Very lovely, very nice”.

We went on to a related exercise alternating eighth notes one up, half tone down from a tonal centre: G, A flat, on up to about an E flat, on the vowels e, oh, ah—in what I think of as a sort “rolling” figure.

Mark: “This exercise has to do with the thought processes of the singer which should not be the same as, say, a pianist, violinist, or clarinetist, where he or she is using different fingers for each pitch. In singing it is quite different. It has to do with *one thought*. And it is the breath that makes the changes, and that is the basis of the pure *legato*, the seamless *legato*. If you listen to Sutherland’s recordings of coloratura passage work, and I mean, it is flawless. It doesn’t sound like she’s singing different notes. It’s all part of the *same thing* the *same thought*. You listen to some others and it’s all ‘ha-ha-ha-ha’”.

VAH: “What do you think of Cecilia Bartoli?”

Mark: “I do *not* like that effect”.

VAH: “You mean, too machine-gun like?”

Mark: “Yes, it’s contrary to what *bel canto* is”.

Being an admirer of Bartoli’s sheer athleticism, here I was taken aback, but the comparison to Sutherland made the revealing point. Returning to the exercise, I remarked that it was the one that really opened up the “ah” vowel for me.

Mark: “Mmmm, I can understand that, but keep it smooth with one thought like having a destination”. We then passed on to another set of exercises comprised of top runs up to about a B flat.

Mark: “You’re in good shape”.

These and other observations carried over into the coaching part of the lesson. Launching into the Mozart Concert Aria, “*Per pieta, non ricercate*”, Mark stopped me almost instantly.

Mark: “Sing that opening phrase in a tenor voice, not so baritonal”.

Then, over an arching top phrase:

Mark: “Try not to sing the tone in such a crooning way. Now crooning means it’s lacking vibrato, not enough vibrato in it. You know, a pop singer will start a tone and gradually the vibrato will come in. That’s OK in popular stuff but not here”.

I thought of some of the criticisms of Canadian Tenor Jon Vickers and accusations of “crooning”.

Mark: “We want the vibrato right at the onset”.

And, so back over the piece cleaning up the vowels and consonants to achieve a legato line and sustained vibrato across the top notes. At another juncture in the piece requiring an interval leap of a twelfth from middle C to a high G, Mark stopped me again.

Mark: “Don’t make the low note sound so out of your range, so baritonal, and see if you can start vibrating on the G right away. In other words, don’t sing the whole phrase so heavily. Take it easier and lighter”.

We did it again, and of course it went much smoother, not to mention easier. And so it went, phrase by phrase, through many repetitions and whole runs through. I found my voice growing in strength and subtlety rather than flagging under Mark’s careful scrutiny—in effect, blocking *out* my quirks even as he blocked *in* the better ways point by technical and expressive point. It’s difficult to keep so much in mind at once, but gradually with practise and constant heeding of one’s efforts, the gap (as much as 80% according to Mark) between the purely technical and the musically expressive begins to close. Like a military pincer manoeuvre, one closes in on the objective: to be able to use one’s improving technique to artistic ends.

From the *messa di voce* exercises and baseball anecdote to the closing phrases of the Mozart I got the message: *vibrato* and *legato* go hand in glove, and my time to learn that lesson once and for all had come—a crucial stage in my vocal reconstruction. A seemingly small matter of big consequences, I won’t forget it. And so it goes for any developing or redeveloping singer, item by item over weeks and months.

3

Like most serious voice students, I have one lesson a week in which the preceding dynamic is repeated, never exactly the same but differently through the successive phases of development and through various repertoires. I practise about an hour and a half a day, exclusive of listening, studying texts, and note pounding to learn new pieces. Add to that time spent reading about music, musicians, opera, philosophy, and the like. Then too there is my writing about the whole business to be kept up to date and revised.

If that seems a fairly full schedule for an avocational singer, consider the following one described by Adolphe Nourrit in a letter to his friend, Duverger.⁵

Here's how I am living. I get up early in the morning, between six and seven. I sing, I study Italian, I sing some more, and then I have breakfast . . . After breakfast comes my Italian lesson, which lasts until eleven. When the teacher has left . . . I sing a little more, then go out to take my lesson with Donizetti. For several days now we have changed our method of working. He is having me read new music, and I have to sing at sight and with the right accent and musical dynamics [to give me] more assurance and accustoming my eyes and intelligence to quicker response . . . Then I take a long and beautiful walk . . . After my walk I go home and study Italian for an hour and a half or two hours.

What Nourrit doesn't mention here were his performance obligations that occupied many evenings in addition to his daily regimen. This was the gruelling schedule he subjected himself to in Naples under Donizetti's tutelage for nine months beginning in March 1838. Initially, he seemed to thrive on it and the makeover of himself into an Italian tenor. After some public success in the new *fach*, he rhapsodised on the new-found power and stentorian timbre he had developed. Having enjoyed top billing at the Paris Opera for thirteen years from 1824 to 1837, the year of Duprez's blockbuster debut, Nourrit was hardly a novice singer. But he was also a weary 36 year old, steeped and nurtured in the French vocal style—indeed its principal exponent—not in the best of health, separated from his wife and family and living in a culture and climate not altogether hospitable.

As the year 1838 wore on, his letters to his wife and others became increasingly ominous, almost unconsciously so, certainly naively so on his part. He writes to his wife, "I no longer know how to sing French. Recently I took to Donizetti some songs of Schubert's, and found myself rather embarrassed when I had to sing them for him. I could no longer find my French inflections, my usual effects, and I am not yet sufficiently familiar with my new manner to use it at once on music I have already sung".⁶

Sometime later after joining him in Milan and hearing him sing in his new *persona*, his wife, Adele, wrote her own trenchant observations to her brother.⁷

Adolphe has felt the disadvantages of the system Donizetti had him adopt. He has tried to return to his own, but cannot. *His head voice is gone, and his mezza voce is gone.* He is obliged to remove the few head tones he had introduced in *Il giuramento*, and he can't

sing those that are properly there in *Norma*. That doesn't make much difference here. The public doesn't ask for delicacies . . . Does the change in voice come from the climate? Or from the method? . . . I think there is something of both, but rather more from the method than the climate. Duprez and the Italian singers of today would suggest as much. Furthermore, *it is nothing new that the development of the chest voice extinguishes the head voice and the half-voice*. Rubini almost never uses the chest voice . . . I reproach him [Nourrit] for the modesty that made him subject himself entirely to the judgement of Donizetti, whose artistic sensibility is far less developed than his. *I reproach him for that unfortunate idea of transformation and progress that has taken hold of him*, when everything around him should have told him that there is nothing but decadence in what is being done in Italy now . . . He went ahead blindly. He tried to change himself at his age, when his grey hairs showed how exhausting the fifteen years of his career had been because of the nature of the roles he sang and because of the way he played them and the emotions he felt.

Despite a brilliant public success with *Il giuramento* the previous 14 November 1838, Nourrit was plagued by the loss of subtlety and nuance in his voice. “To please the Italians I have to adopt a certain kind of sonority that one cannot acquire except by sacrificing the fine and delicate nuances that permit a variety of effects and give each role a distinctive character”.⁸ The truth, the consequences, of what he had undertaken was dawning on him. Despondent over the artistic and personal costs of his Italian venture, the levelling of his voice to a single timbral dimension, the eclipse of his true vocal identity, Nourrit at last realised “that I deceived myself. Perhaps my example may save other artists from the Italian sickness”.⁹ Further beset by liver and heart problems, financial difficulties, and finally, outright psychosis, he leapt to his death from the top of an apartment building on the night of 8 March 1839, four days after his 37th birthday.

While Nourrit correctly surmised the new direction that the opera genre was taking, his decision to *totally* reconstruct himself in the Italian mode was ill conceived from the start. Even the best Italian opera houses of the time were slovenly mismanaged with exhausting performance schedules and meagre repertoires. As Pleasants sums it up, “Matters of health aside, Nourrit's going to Italy to master the new Italian style was, as his wife subsequently observed, a rash decision for one who was not only at the height of a glorious career, but who was also thirty-five years old, with a voice already exposed to sixteen years [*sic*] of singing some of the most exacting and exhausting roles in the tenor repertoire, many of them roles he created”.¹⁰

On the purely speculative side, one wonders what Nourrit's first teacher, the elder Manuel Garcia (1775-1832), also the teacher of his own famous children, Maria Malibran, Pauline Viardot, and Manuel Garcia, Jr., would have thought of Nourrit's attempt to make himself over wholesale into something he was not. In all likelihood Garcia would have agreed with the sage advice of Jerome Hines that experimentation with the voice and incorporation of new and different effects according to repertoire is both necessary and desirable, "but with one basic axiom in mind: *Never acquire something new at the expense of losing something of the old.* As you experiment with new things, constantly go back and be sure you can still do everything you were able to do before". And furthermore, be aware that as you develop a new technique or effect, that "*Each particular technique will bring with it some particular limitation*".¹¹ Nourrit clearly violated the first axiom and discovered the truth of the second the hardest way possible. In other words, Nourrit squandered his potential on a false dream, an attempt at reconstruction gone sadly wrong.

4

So what are we to make of the risks of attempting to reconstruct oneself as a singer either after a long layoff, as in my own case, or to affect a total makeover as in Nourrit's case? How far can we trust our own or others' judgement as to where our potential might lead us? After all, Nourrit is hardly alone in falling afoul of a false dream. Amongst singers, broken voices fall not far behind broken romances and broken careers in the order of disappointments. John Dewey is some help here in understanding the liabilities of such an undertaking.

Dewey stresses the fact that we are always *in* experience, that is, interpreting, reinterpreting, and sometimes misinterpreting what happens to us. "For life is no uninterrupted march or flow. It is a thing of histories, each with its own plot, its own inception and movement toward its close, each having its own particular rhythmic movement; each with its own unrepeated quality pervading it throughout".¹² Like it or not, we are each of us a "thing of histories", telling, retelling and reconstructing our personal stories or versions of events as new slants or facts come available. Things don't just happen to us; we *take them in*, in various changeable versions. Such "perception", as Dewey calls it, is a condition of growth and

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development in virtually any practical or theoretical enterprise, from art or business to higher maths and scientific inquiry.¹³ The particular coloration, emotional tone or urgency we attach to any particular experience that causes it to come alive for us, he calls the “esthetic stamp.” In other words, every notable experience whether good or bad, trivial or momentous, artistic or otherwise, will exhibit an element of the aesthetic, what, for lack of a better word, we might call “involvement”—what is immediately felt in the course of things. Or in Dewey’s words,¹⁴

An experience of thinking has its own esthetic [sic] quality. It differs from those experiences that are acknowledged to be esthetic [e.g., art works], but only in its materials . . . This artistic structure may be immediately felt. In so far, it is esthetic. What is even more important is that not only is this quality a significant motive in undertaking intellectual inquiry and in keeping it honest, but that no intellectual activity is an integral event (is an experience), unless it is rounded out with this quality. Without it, thinking is inconclusive. In short, esthetic cannot be sharply marked off from intellectual experience since the latter must bear an esthetic stamp to be itself complete.

Dewey’s intention here as elsewhere is to draw attention to the ubiquity of the aesthetic, thus defined, in everyday life, and above all, to lay to rest “the idea that esthetic perception is an affair for odd moments”.¹⁵ Rather, it permeates all our activities in varying degrees.

As mentioned, in my own views of learning within and without the arts, I have taken Dewey’s insights very much to heart. For now, however, I will take these very same ideas and flip them over to reveal their potential for harm and delusion. Maybe we need some delusions to keep going. But what if they are destructive?

Was Nourrit operating under a destructive delusion? It would seem so, the aesthetic stamp laying heavily upon his soul, so heavily in fact that he studiously ignored all the warnings before and during his sojourn in Italy. How could a man of such consummate artistry so thoroughly deceive himself? In a word, ego, and the naïve expectation that he could do it all—bring vocal subtlety to the Italians and absorb their intonation without cost to his own vocal and artistic integrity. His wife put her finger on it. He proceeded “blindly” and in the thrall of “that unfortunate idea of transformation and progress that has taken hold of him.” What we wouldn’t give to have a recording or transcription of just one of Nourrit’s lessons with Donizetti! We know the sad outcome, but how revealing it would be to see precisely how long and with what subterfuges the delusion persisted.

Memory is fallible, from muscle memory, to recollections of things past, to just plain forgetting lessons once learned. Dewey speaks of the esthetic in our activities as keeping us “honest” (honesty, after all, is as much a scientific as moral virtue). We may *feel* that we are being honest with ourselves, in our efforts, towards others, but how can we be sure? Unless there are certain external checks and balances (e.g., a reliable teacher, colleague, or helpmate) there is no end to which self-deception and delusion may carry us. Not a few aspiring singers exist in a dream world of hopes and fantasies, sometimes fuelled by unscrupulous charlatans whose business it is to keep them dreaming impossible dreams. It’s one thing to lend encouragement leavened by critical judgement and realistic expectations, quite another to exploit the student’s gullibility. Still, for the sober minded, there are checks.

As I look back over old scores, for example, I can see clearly where one or other of my teachers or coaches tried to correct a mistake in intonation, phraseology, or diction. I am also amazed at how many of those mistakes come back to haunt me. They require constant vigilance to eliminate, and I am learning old lessons all over again, as if I never had absorbed them. Did I ever? It would seem that I must have, but that is relatively little help to me now except to realise that it cannot be done alone. The honesty of critical scrutiny must come as much from without as from within. We may learn the skills of self-supervision, but they are never entirely reliable on their own. Too many involuntary quirks lurk in our psyches and somas to defeat us.

Yet, there are those who cannot, or will not, take direction or criticism in the positive spirit in which it is given.¹⁶ Or who, like Nourrit, become so obsessed with an *idée fixe* as to be undeterred until disaster ensues. Such cases as theirs bring us to the influence of personality and temperament, a topic on which John Dewey, a philosopher and psychologist, is strangely silent. Then there are those who hear the advice but do not listen to it, or who cannot absorb it into their efforts, resulting in a gap between means and ends—a topic on which Dewey waxed logically eloquent but without any attention to the psychology of failure. Dewey goes on at length about artists’ “experiments” with their media and contents, comparing them to scientists in their disciplined empiricism,¹⁷ but he has little or nothing to say about their failures or why some individuals, against all evidence and advice, will persist on a losing course.

Many artists, such as Picasso and Matisse, are capable of continual renewal and creative development. But others are not so lucky. Pleyers rightly entitled his book, *The Great Tenor Tragedy*. Nourrit's is a classic tragedy in the Aristotelian sense: a failure of character or personality with all good intentions leading to self-destruction. To repeat Mark Pearson's observation earlier on, "habits of the spirit" are often more difficult to overcome than any limitations of the tissues.

Finally, there is the presumption in Dewey's notion of the reconstruction of experience—the ways in which we grow and learn—that the outcome will always be good or at least an improvement upon where we started. As with the concept of potential, that is a hasty assumption. Just as we all have a potential for evil doing, we may also reconstruct ourselves in ways injurious to ourselves or to others. Nourrit's is only one of the more spectacular examples of such a misguided effort. Lesser failures at lesser tasks are commonplace from dieting to New Year's resolutions. For example, am I perhaps deluding myself in trying to recover the atrophied skills of the singer I once was? That's the natural next question to ask.

I'd like to think that in the main I am not deluding myself, but what evidence is there for that? For one thing, notice I did not say recover the *voice* I once had. That voice is gone, and my present voice is different, though not necessarily better or worse, just different. That is apparent to me now and to those who heard me sing in the past. So the "reconstruction" cannot be reduced to mere recovery of a lost voice; it is learning anew to sing, an entirely new beginning. Also, unlike Nourrit, I am not trying to make myself into something alien, for instance, a Helden or Verdian tenor. I was and still am a lyric tenor, pure and complex.

If anything, given my temperament and self-doubts compounded by the age spectre, I am prone to exaggerate setbacks and failures—call it the "nightmare factor". The perfectionist in me rails at every lapse or failing. No matter, as Jerome Hines advises, get up and go at it again. Recovery from the nightmare factor is like getting back in the saddle after falling off a horse. Yet others, and not only singers that I have observed over the years, find it difficult to resist the nightmare factor. Paralysed by the fear of failure, even a fine proven talent can founder. Anyone, but especially a singer, unable to cope with discouragement, risk, and temporary setbacks is operating under a handicap. A certain mental toughness is necessary to get over those moments.

In other words, delusional dreams come in two equal and opposite forms: delusions of grandeur and delusions (nightmares) of failure. Both are defeating. Dreams need to be grounded in a sober assessment of where one is and where one is heading.

So what other checks are there on wild dreams, positive or negative? In my own case, first and most obviously, is the expert judgement of Mark Pearson and the very precise procedures, stages, and phases of development he has been conducting me through. Then there is my recent public exposure and performance feedback. Singers must, after all, get out there and sing and not hide in the practise studio. Keeping a log of tapes and transcriptions is yet another check on progress, or lack of it. My lapses in musicianship—particularly rhythmic errors—still embarrass me. But so long as I can point to *specific* gains relative to the goals I originally had in mind, I should be safe from self-deception. If I had any illusions of becoming the next King of the High C's or being discovered by the Met, *then* I would be deluded. Conversely, if I thought that I could not sing up to marginal professional levels, *then* I would be deluded.

The point is that all the aforementioned checks and balances are external to my own efforts and ambitions. In the aggregate they amount to what is commonly called a “reality check”. Taken distributively or piece-meal, they constitute exact, small measures of exact, small accomplishments—as illustrated by the lesson in *legato* described above. When Dewey speaks of the “continuum of ends and means”, what he has in mind is that precise connecting of means and ends within an overall vision of personal growth. What saves a dream from being a delusion is, in a phrase, *critical oversight* at every stage of the enterprise. We cannot presume that growth and development is either automatic with effort or always for the good. Dreams can thwart a talent as readily as they can inspire, sad to say. Still, without a dream, we are dead in the water.

5

When considering *da capo* reconstruction of the voice (or any atrophied complex skill for that matter), it's important to realise that the beginning is a new beginning, less a matter of getting back to where one was than of starting over in the present. I was less aware of that simple fact at the outset than I am now. Furthermore, the voice that one develops anew may or may not differ significantly from the voice one once had. In the case of famed singer, David Daniels, for

example, who switched from mediocre tenor to consummate counter tenor, the difference may be striking. In my own case, less striking. Voices change over time anyway even if in constant use and training. Just as potentials are not fixed in the first place, then or now, they also change with each successive phase of redevelopment. The more one's technical proficiency increases, the more options open up. Of course, past experience and training may inform or enhance present efforts, but singing is an interpretative art, a performing art, not a static one. Except for recordings, performances differ however slightly from one occasion to the next, and even more so over longer periods. That's part of the thrill of live performance for singers and audiences alike.

One is reminded of Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau's several recordings of Schubert's *Winterreiser* over the course of his career. Whether one prefers the youthful or later versions is not the point. The point is that a 30 year-old sings with a personality—an interpretative slant—that is different from the 50-year-old. If one literally sings one's personality, maturity brings with it not only timbral changes in the voice but expressive ones as well. In my own recent work on Schumann's *Dichterlieber*, for example, it was clear to me that I felt it differently from my early youthful attempts at it—naturally having now lived through most of the emotions expressed therein. Even as voices cannot be recreated out of the whole cloth of the past or made over entirely into something alien to the individual, so also one's expressive potential, far from fixed in time, similarly alters with time and chance. As one *sees* things differently through the successive phases of life, so too one sings differently. That is part and parcel with each of us being, in Dewey's telling phrase, a “thing of histories”. That history—what we make of it—can be as harmful as helpful depending on the critical checks on delusion available to us and whether we listen to them with our third ear.

Notes

¹ This article is adapted from my forthcoming book, *Hearing Siren Voices: A Singer's Odyssey* (under review).

² William James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (1899; New York: Dover, 1992), p. 36.

³ See John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Putnam's Sons 1980), first published in 1934, p. 53.

⁴ Henry Pleasants, *The Great Tenor Tragedy, The Last Days of Adolphe Nourrit as Told (Mostly) by Himself* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1995), p. 147.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 105-106; italics mine.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

¹¹ Jerome Hines, *The Four Voices of Man* (New York: Proscenium Publishers, 1997), pp. xix-xx. Italics his.

¹² John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, pp. 35-36.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-39.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 53-54.

¹⁶ Mario Lanza, for one, who baritone Robert Merrill said “never took anyone’s counsel”. In Roland L. Bessette, *Mario Lanza, Tenor in Exile* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1999), p. 35.

¹⁷ Dewey, *AAE*, pp. 45-47.

About the Author

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