

Vocal Coach or Voice Teacher

Which do you need?

The difference between a vocal coach and a voice teacher used to be clear. But these days there is a lot of confusion about who does what—especially in the musical theatre and pop worlds. The classical world has always had pretty clear boundaries between the two, because coaches are such a natural and vital part of an opera singer's process. In musical theatre and pop music, however, coaches are not as prevalent; as a result there can be a lot of crossover in the two jobs.

I spoke with two vocal coaches and one voice teacher to see what they had to say. Georgia Stitt (www.georgiastitt.com) is a composer, lyricist, musical director, conductor, arranger, pianist, and—when she has time—a sought-after vocal coach. Her debut album, *This Ordinary Thursday*, was released in 2007 and features vocals by some of Broadway's best-known performers. Vocal coach Rakefet Hak (rhak@arts.ucla.edu) was recruited for the Lindemann Young Artist Development Program at New York's Metropolitan Opera, where she coached and served as assistant conductor and rehearsal accompanist. She was later recruited by Plácido Domingo for the Los Angeles Opera and is currently director of the UCLA Opera Studio. Internationally known voice teacher John Henny (www.johnhenny.com) is based in Los Angeles but has taught extensively throughout the United States; recently he was a guest teacher at the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts, co-founded by Paul McCartney.



Georgia Stitt

What a Coach Does

Stitt says there are several reasons a singer might book a coaching session. One is to look for new material: "I can make suggestions as to what kind of

A Vocal Coach

1. Is an accomplished pianist
2. Is expert in the repertoire of a particular genre
3. Teaches new music and new roles from a musical standpoint
4. Has an intimate understanding of all aspects of acting and vocal interpretation
5. Suggests performance and audition material
6. Knows foreign languages if working

A Voice Teacher

in the classical world

1. Builds and balances the voice
2. Understands the mechanics of the voice
3. Has an intimate knowledge of bridges in the voice—breaks, passaggio—and can teach one to blend registers
4. Plays enough piano to vocalize you effectively
5. Recognizes a balanced tone
6. Should teach a vocal technique adaptable to any style

teach these styles, just as an expert dialectician can teach the various regional dialects of a language.

Polishing your performance is another reason to visit a coach. This includes interpretation, acting the song, and the musical elements of rhythm and phrasing.

What a Teacher Does

A voice teacher is mostly about vocal technique, which includes smoothing the breaks in the voice; evening out and blending the registers; assisting with breathing, control, and building power; mastering vibrato; and increasing range. Says Henny, "My main focus is always just keeping the voice balanced within the song. [I] balance the voice so that all the registers are easily accessed by the singer—so at no point do they feel they have to strain or flip or go to a different sound, other than what they want to use stylistically."

To be effective with style, you first need to have a good technique. This is why you would study with a voice teacher for a while before going to a vocal coach. Build the instrument, and then you'll have so much more available to you for your interpretation and style. "The vocal coach really begins to polish some of those higher values of singing, which really is communication," Henny says. "The voice teacher's just giving you the tools so that your communication's unhindered."

only to nonmusicians but also to musicians."

As a voice teacher, I'm always suggesting music for my students and helping them with auditions and audition material. I also work some with rhythm and phrasing. But this is more on the periphery of what I do, which is mostly technique. If you need to understand more about a particular style than I feel capable of helping you with, or if you need to rehearse with an excellent pianist or learn a new, complicated piece, learn a song for an audition, put an act together, or simply move to a higher level in your performance skills (if you're ready), I'll send you to a coach. For classical students, there are also foreign languages to learn. If you're technically ready to take on that repertoire, a coach is necessary to teach you the nuances of the language. Do not try to learn from a recording.

Teachers and coaches must have an excellent ear to recognize good tone quality. Some coaches know a bit about technique; however, the experienced ones will send you to a voice teacher for most technical issues. Stitt says she can address things like "you've got to loosen your jaw, your tongue's tight, let's see if we can 'ih' instead of a pure 'e'—things like that. But once it gets into 'You clearly don't know how to manipulate that register,' then we're a little bit out of my ability to solve problems."



John Henny

Working Together

"It's very important to mention that basically the vocal coach and the voice teacher are working toward the same goal," says Hak. "The goal is for the singers to come out of their experience with us singing the best that they can. It's just that we focus on different things."

Something teachers and coaches have in common is a passion for music. Henny says his particular passion is figuring out the voice and balancing it: "When suddenly [someone] gets dialed in on a vowel and you hear those overtones come in and that ring just pins you to the back wall...it's like, 'That's it! That's it!'"

The object is always a performance in which the singing, acting, style, and interpretation all come together. Stitt sums it up: "I think the key to good performing...musical theater, opera,

What a Coach Does

Stitt says there are several reasons a singer might book a coaching session. One is to look for new material: "I can make suggestions as to what kind of pieces they should be singing." She also says people come to her and say, "I've been given this music to learn. I don't know how it goes. I don't know how to make any choices about it. What do you think they're looking for?" Finally, "A lot of times people come to me thinking that they have to show everything that they do in a 30-second audition: 'I'm a soprano, but I can also belt, and I can be funny, and I can be very heartfelt and serious.'... I help them make choices as to what is the strongest presentation of their skills."

Style also falls into the vocal coach's arena, whether it's musical theatre, pop, country, or opera. There are even different styles within a genre. A good coach should be able to

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Why the Confusion Between the Two?

It's really the result of voice teachers and vocal coaches overstepping their respective boundaries. "The confusion, I think, actually starts with the instructors themselves," says Hak. "There's a very fine line between those two professions, and that fine line is many times crossed by both sides. When you talk about vocal technique, it is so tied up with how you say the text, how you breathe, how you phrase the music, that it's very hard not to cross over to the other side—it's really one package. But it's always confusing. I find myself having to explain what I do a lot, not

like, 'That's it! That's it!'"

The object is always a performance in which the singing, acting, style, and interpretation all come together. Stitt sums it up: "I think the key to good performing—musical theatre, anyway—is finding the true musician in you and then finding the natural actor in you and figuring out how to do those two things at the same time." A good voice teacher and a good vocal coach can assist you in reaching that end.

Michael Goodrich is an internationally known vocal instructor and lecturer based in Los Angeles. He works with singers and actors in all areas of the entertainment industry, including Broadway, movies, television, voiceovers, and recording (www.goodrichvocal.com).

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