

## TWO VOCAL QUESTS

*Marlena Kleinman Malas and Joan Patenaude-Yarnell seek beauty and freedom in their students' voices*

BY HEIDI WALESON

For Marlena Kleinman Malas, being a voice teacher started with asking questions. A 1960 Curtis graduate and a singer, she was married to bass-baritone Spiro Malas, who was performing with Luciano Pavarotti, Joan Sutherland, and Marilyn Horne. "I used to go to dinner with them, and I'd take a notebook with me," she recalls. "I had questions about singing—about breath, placement, and support. How did this career happen? What are these vowels? I thought Joan would be upset, but she wasn't at all. If I didn't bring it, she would say, 'Where are the questions?'" And it was Ms. Sutherland's husband, the conductor Richard Bonyngé, who first suggested to Ms. Malas that teaching might be her true calling.

Ms. Malas began teaching in 1977; in 1986 she was invited to join the Curtis faculty. Today she and Joan Patenaude-Yarnell, who came to Curtis a decade later, are the voice teachers of Curtis's Vocal Studies (voice and opera) Department, headed by Mikael Eliassen. The program also includes a sixteen-member staff of coaches, pianists, diction experts, and instructors in such disciplines as fencing and Alexander technique. The singers are a select group ("the pick of the litter," as Ms. Patenaude-Yarnell puts it), numbering about twenty-five undergraduates, graduate students, and advanced diploma students.

Both voice teachers live in New York and come to Curtis every Monday. They teach at other conservatories as well: Ms. Malas at the Juilliard School, and both at the Manhattan School of Music. Curtis, they say, is unique: Because the program is so small (Manhattan, for example, has 230 singers) the teachers can be in frequent communication with Mr. Eliassen about the students and their progress. There are no juries and no required final recital. "It's like a young-artist program," Ms. Patenaude-Yarnell says. "You perform from the moment you walk in the door."

Also unusual is the fact that the teachers don't attend the auditions as they do at other conservatories; at Curtis, Mr. Eliassen chooses the singers. He also casts the operas. "Mikael is very much his own man," Ms. Patenaude-Yarnell says. "He knows what he likes, and

he says, 'If there's a mistake to be made, it will be mine.'"

Ms. Malas adds, "I trust him, because I think we hear alike."

Ms. Malas, a mezzo-soprano, began her career singing small roles at New York City Opera. But as her career progressed, so did her paralyzing stage fright; some vocal troubles, which she now thinks were emotional in origin, sent her around to different voice teachers in search of solutions. That quest became an important part of her foundation as a teacher. "I accumulated a lot of knowledge from different people, and that trained my ears," she says. "I learned so much about different ways of approaching singing."

Even the turmoil helped. "I believe that I have a sensitivity to the neuroses of singers because I went through it myself. Still, I keep the boundaries as much as I can and try to be nurturing without overstepping."

Canadian-born Patenaude-Yarnell came to teaching after a successful performing career as a soprano. In 1964, while still a conservatory student, she made her debut as Micaela in Bizet's *Carmen* at the Canadian Opera Company, opposite Jon Vickers. She sang such roles as Juliette, Violetta, Butterfly, and Alice Ford in opera houses around North America and made a specialty of Poulenc's *La Voix humaine*.

By the late 1980s, she began to look to the future. "I was always obsessed with the human voice—not with the muscles or technical names, but how to make it work most beautifully," she says. An invitation to teach at the American Institute of Musical Studies in Graz, Austria, started the ball rolling, and she soon moved into teaching exclusively. Mr. Eliassen, with whom she had done some recording and touring, first asked her to be an adjunct voice teacher at Curtis, and then, in 1996, brought her on to the faculty.

Teaching voice has special challenges. One is that singers start later than instrumentalists



Marlena Kleinman Malas spoke at an alumni reunion event in 2002.  
~ PHOTO: DON TRACY

—a seventeen-year-old singer coming to Curtis is considered young and inexperienced, while her violinist counterpart has probably had a dozen years of training. Some students sound wonderful right away—"the trick is not to destroy her or take away her natural abilities and coordination," says Ms. Patenaude-Yarnell. Others may already have bad habits but a sound that catches the ear. "When I'm listening to singers, a person's voice could be cracking, or whatever, but if the voice says something to me—I'm there," says Ms. Malas.

Once the student is in the studio, there are basics to building technique. "The great singers obey the acoustical laws of Mother Nature," says Ms. Patenaude-Yarnell. "Posture, breathing, text, and the lining up of the registers—for me that's the foundation of what great singing is. They have to sing legato, fioratura, *mesa di voce*. They have to sing the right repertoire. They must go through the four hundred years of history of singing. They must sing *bel canto*—there's no mistake that *bel canto* was born in Italy, because it came out of the language. Most important they have to keep the brain ahead of the voice, to know how you want to sound before you sing. I call it 'filing a flight plan.'"

For Ms. Malas the goal is healthy singing. "I love a round sound that has metal in it. A sound that's unimpeded, that projects easily.

I'm not into big, but I'm into beautiful and free, which makes it big. And I want people to sound like themselves, to find out what the real voice is, without making something up. Sometimes with young voices, it's easier to find that."

Since the singer's instrument is the body, it takes a particular skill to be able to communicate how students can get to where they need to go. Ms. Malas, working with a student on a Bellini aria in her New York studio, at one point tells the young woman to put her hand on her chin. Later she explains, "The jaw is one of the strongest bones in the body, as the tongue is one of the strongest muscles. Singers are notorious for grabbing there [getting tense] and controlling the sound, because it's closest to the voice box, and they feel more in control, more secure. But if you do that, you stop the airflow. If you stop the airflow, you have a problem allowing the sound to be free. The ideal thing is, you go from your diaphragm with the breath, to the resonance in your head, not grabbing anything, just air flowing, and you form the vowels with your tongue. That's what we hear when great singers sing, which is wonderful because it is so vulnerable. For young people to do that is a major thing.

"I have this soprano put her hand there because it just releases all the tension, in the back of neck as well. Then she can experience the freedom of air flow. I tell her, don't go for the sound, go for the physical feeling of making the sound. Putting her hand there—that works for her."

Another important skill is avoiding information overload. "They can't take it all in at once," says Ms. Patenaude-Yarnell. "You have to make choices and decide which aspect to work on. I suggest that singers do that when they vocalize at home as well: Pick the thing you are going to think of today. Posture. Or planning each vowel and how it changes so smoothly and easily."

Voice teachers also find themselves dealing with emotional issues: "We have these sphincter muscles—and that's what we use for singing," Ms. Malas says. "A person comes



Joan Patenaude-Yarnell's current students include tenor Joshua Stewart, shown here in 2005.

~ PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA

in emotionally upset, with the sphincter muscles tightened up, and if you activate that, the tears come. You just have to wait until it passes. Or say, 'We'll do this another day.' Or sometimes just let them talk."

Ms. Patenaude-Yarnell wants her students to "take ownership" of their learning, to ask her questions, to learn to teach themselves by building a "toolbox" that they can use for the rest of their lives. Still, singers and voice teachers often maintain close relationships with their teachers long into their professional careers. "They come back all the time," Ms. Patenaude-Yarnell says. "Susan Graham spoke at the Manhattan graduation recently, and she said something so wise: 'You think your studies are over, but never leave a teacher. Your body is constantly changing—your weight, your emotional life—and you can't go it alone.' She's been with Marlena for twenty-one years." ☺

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