

# The More You Know

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH

To continue learning over the course of a lifetime requires acknowledgment that there is much that we do not understand.



A couple of years ago, I came across a *New York Times* opinion article by Lisa Pryor titled, “How to Counter the Circus of Pseudoscience.” In the article, Pryor (who is a medical doctor) bemoans the prevalence of pseudoscience in popular culture. In so doing, she describes a phenomenon of cognitive bias called the Dunning-Kruger Effect. As she explains, “In short, the less you know, the less able you are to recognize how little you know, so the less likely you are to recognize your errors and shortcomings.”

Essentially, once we know a little bit about a topic, we tend to assume we know more about that topic than we actually do: knowing just enough to be dangerous.

This occurrence seems especially prevalent in our field. Since pretty much everyone enjoys music of some kind,

many believe themselves to be experts on identifying “good” singing and “bad” singing, even if they can’t articulate the qualities that cause them to make those assessments.

The Dunning-Kruger Effect can also apply to singers and their skill levels. A singer who has mastered one Mozart soprano role, for instance, should not presume she is capable of mastering every Mozart soprano role, each of which will have its own unique challenges and difficulties. Barbarina ≠ Queen of the Night. Similarly, a singer who delivers a successful performance of *Dichterliebe* should not assume he would be equally successful taking on *Winterreise*, since not all Lieder cycles require the same vocal capabilities, stamina, and expressive maturity.

This extends to teaching as well. Teachers who have had success leading some students to improved vocal technique and artistry should not assume that they will be equally successful with every student. No single teacher—no matter how well established and well respected—will be the perfect fit for every singer.

Similarly, teachers who work primarily with singers who are at the graduate or young artist level should not assume that their practices and techniques would be equally successful (or appropriate) with the adolescent voices found in middle school and high school settings. This goes beyond the personality and communication style that allows certain student/teacher pairings to “click.” Rather, it speaks to the level of knowledge and experience that is needed to successfully guide specific populations—and knowing enough to recognize when that knowledge and experience may be outside of one person’s skill set or primary area of focus.

Intriguingly, the Dunning-Kruger Effect accounts for more than just assuming we know more than we do. As Pryor describes, “For the highly skilled, like trained scientists, the opposite is true: the more you know, the more likely you are to see how little you know.”

Even for those of us who have spent the majority of our lives immersed in study and practice of all things vocal, the awareness that we can never be experts in every aspect of

the voice can be frustrating. But it may also help to focus our work in the areas where we can truly excel.

Pryor sums up what may be the take-away message of the article by saying, “Most doctors, especially the good ones, are acutely aware of the limits of their knowledge. I have learned from those much more experienced and qualified than me that humility is something to be cultivated over time, not lost.”

I once asked one of my college professors, years after I had graduated, for clarification about a practice I remembered learning from him in the classroom. I was surprised to hear that he had since stopped teaching that practice in the intervening years. When I reminded him that he had been a rather vehement advocate of that practice when I was his student, he said, “Yes, but that was back when I knew everything. Now that I’m older, I’ve learned more about what I don’t know.”

Although there may be a degree of comfort that can come with certainty, appreciating the complexities of a topic threatens the security of absolutes. Being willing to grow and adapt when new information and deeper understandings emerge, and to acknowledge all that we do not know, may be a critical component of being a lifelong learner.

*Brian Manternach’s bio can be found on page 39.*

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