Training Dramatic Voices:
An Interview with Sharon Sweet

Interview Conducted by Dr. Sean McCarther

Sean McCarther (SM): Can you talk about your development as a dramatic voice?

Sharon Sweet (SS): <Laughs.> Oh, dear. Well, it’s an odd thing. I think teachers make a mistake classifying voices in the first minute, the first year, or even the first four or five years. I don’t think we can at the college level especially, because the voices haven’t finished maturing and so much can take place in those years. When I started as a freshman, I was considered a mezzo or a contralto, and had a very, very fast vibrato, like a machine gun. So all through undergrad I was a mezzo. I went to grad school as a mezzo. It was my teacher there, Dr. Leslie Bennett, who really gave me a start to my technique. He had lost part of his lungs to cancer, but still had the best breath control of anyone I’ve ever met. My first six weeks of graduate school I did nothing but breath. Learning how to breathe, learning how to support the voice, learning what it feels like all the time. I never had anybody through my master’s degree talk to me about my soft palate or anything else. His concept was that if you breathe low enough, your soft palate goes up. I never had to think about it.

So, I started my professional career as a mezzo. I was with him for about three years when he said, “It’s time for you to study with a woman.” I was fortunate to be accepted into Curtis and went to study with Margaret Harshaw. In one of our first lessons she said to me, “Do you know what the soft palate is,” and I said, “I think so.” She said, “Take a breath for me.” I did and she said, “Ahh, it’s fine- we don’t have to worry about that.” And that was it, that was my introduction to the term “soft palate.” I was 24, almost 25 when I started with her. She said when I grew up I would be a soprano. So, we worked on the middle and the top and the vibrato (which had already started to slow down with Bennett) and the voice continued to take shape.

Unfortunately, after one year, Harshaw decided that she wasn’t coming back to Curtis. I went into the office and told them that I too would not be coming back the next year. So I left. After that I went to study with Madame Gurewich. She said to me, “You are either a soprano or a very funny mezzo.” She said, “No more
public performance until you have made the transition.” So I canceled everything and we went back to the little Italian Art Songs, Brahms, and Purcell just to work the passaggio. We did that for about 4 or 5 months. And my first performance as a soprano was in Philadelphia in Messiah. It was like saying, “Here I am, I’m a soprano now!”

I’ve been very fortunate with the teachers I have had. I try to model my teaching after them. Sometimes I get very excited when I get a big voice as a freshman or as a graduate student. Really excited. I say, “Oh, we can do this piece and this rep and this and this and this,” but then I have to slap my wrist and say, “No, they have to sing ‘Sebben crudele.’ They have to sing ‘Caro mio ben.’” They have to learn how to manage the middle. Some people teach from the bottom up and others teach from the top down. I’m a top down person because the head voice is infinite and the chest voice is finite. I think sopranos especially end up losing their top very fast if they’re bottom oriented.

The first aria Gurewich gave me was Dove sono. It doesn’t go above an A but really works the passaggio. You can’t start singing As, B-flats, and Bs successfully until you can sing Fs, F-sharps, and Gs. Her vowel that she worked with all the time was [i] because it is the most forward and gets you into the mask. It’s the easiest one to get singers to realize that “ugly is right,” to put it in short terms. If it sounds big and beautiful to you, the audience is getting leftovers. Once that [i] is established with balance then the [o], [a], and [u] get connected. Gurewich always believed that there was a little bit of [i] in every vowel.

SM: What do you listen for to identify dramatic voices, particularly in young singers?

SS: How they turn. If they are able to turn the voice in the passaggio and how it goes. If the voice blooms up and out <makes a V shape with her hands> the tendency is that the voice will be bigger. If they go through the passaggio and the voice stays cylindrical, then most likely they are not a dramatic voice. I’ve been fooled but not very often. I find this to be the same for women and men. I don’t see any difference in the training of men and women. We are all created equal. The breathing mechanism is basically the same, the soft palate is the same, so why should we treat
them differently? Women don’t have falsetto but we have whistle tone which is conceptually the same thing. I call whistle tone the female falsetto and use it very rarely. But Bennett used it a lot with me to open up the top. I didn’t sing real high notes all the time, but I whistle toned up to E-flats, Es, and Fs. And that’s how he taught me to feel the air pressure.

I tell all my students, “you have to go look at ducks in the water. Up top, they just glide along, but underneath their legs are working like crazy. You have to divide your body that way. From here up <she points to her epigastrium> you should look like you are doing nothing. From here down <she again points to her epigastrium> is where all the action happens.”

SM: How do you work with undergraduates who have dramatic potential?

SS: I don’t treat the small voices any different than the bigger voices. The technique is the same. There isn’t one technique for a dramatic voice and one technique for a tiny voice. The technique is the technique. The potential of the voice shows itself as the voice improves. I think that is one reason why my students are so supportive of one another. Because they are all in the same boat. The technique is the technique; it doesn’t change. And I treat them all equally. I work really hard to make sure that nobody in the studio is doing the same repertoire at the same time so there is no comparison within the studio. It’s a lot of work for me but I think it is worth it. Yeah, I don’t treat them differently.

SM: So what is your process?

SS: <Laughs> The first question I always ask a new student is “What is your favorite vowel?” And they’ll say oh, [a] or [u] and I’ll say, “Great, let’s start with [i].”<Chuckles> And that breaks the ice. I always have them put a [z] in front of it to help them get that forward position. I try not to get too technical in the beginning. I do a lot of lip trills. If they can’t do a particular phrase I’ll say “Let’s lip trill it.” If the lip trill stops, I ask them “Why do you think that lip trill stopped?” And then they say, well, my air stopped moving.” “Ah ha! So, let’s keep the air moving.” Then I ask, what did that feel like, what was different, why was that more successful. I always try to ask them questions so they can learn to feel it.
I’m a big back breather. I believe in the back because we are three-dimensional people and not just a front. A colleague mentioned to me, “You are very big on breathing in the back.” And I said, “how else are you going to get the high notes if you don’t feel that expansion?”

I also have my students play mental games with themselves. As the scale goes down, you think up. As the scale goes up, you think down; a little opposite game. Singing is like a mirror image. What you hear is opposite of what the audience hears. If what you hear is great then the audience hears the opposite and the opposite of great is not so good! So you turn it around. YOU take the not so good. I can’t stand the way my voice sounds in my head, but I know it’s right out there. It also feels better. I’m constantly asking my students what they feel. Don’t tell me what you SHOULD feel, tell me what you actually feel. Because we only get them one hour a week, I have to be sure that they can duplicate what we are doing, that they have an arsenal of ways to fix things in the practice room.

Now, the technique that I teach, the technique that was taught to me… it takes a long time. They are not finished products when they finish here. People will say of a student “Oh, that’s never going to be a voice.” No, we don’t have the right to say that. We don’t have the right to say that somebody isn’t going to sing. I keep my crystal ball permanently in the repair shop. I don’t know what will happen. I learned this lesson from observing Bennett. One day this little girl, with a pretty voice, not a great voice, but a pretty voice, came in to a lesson with Bennett. After the lesson, I said to him, “How can you continue to encourage her? Clearly, it’s not going to be a professional voice.” And he said, “How do you know that? My job is to teach her the same technique that I’m teaching you. And the rest is nature.” And that’s true. A former student of mine had a terrible time during her undergraduate work with me, but now she is a singing professional. She is making money singing. So, you can’t say somebody won’t sing. It was said to me. “You will never sing.” And to a young singer that could destroy them. It could have destroyed me, but I’m stubborn as all get-out and my teachers said, “don’t listen to them.” But for a lesser student who isn’t as steeled in who they are, it can destroy them. And we don’t have that right.

For that reason I purposefully keep my studio mixed: some stronger singers and some weaker students, so they encourage each other and have
something to strive for. The strong ones see how hard the weaker ones are working and that inspires them to work harder.

**SM:** Can you talk a little bit about unnaturally maturing young voices?

**SS:** People think that by making this sound *<makes a very throaty, woofy, hoot>* they sound mature. It doesn’t. It just makes you sound old. When I have singers that do that, I say, “Alright... You sound like I do and I’m in my 60s. If you sound like you are 60 when you are only 20, what are you going to sound like when you actually are 60? You are young- be thankful.” I don’t understand why teachers teach that but I think it’s the profession that wants these mature voices at 22. It doesn’t fit. And people in the professional world don’t care if you will be destroyed in three years. When you are done you are done, and they are on to the next one. And teachers are falling into that trap. This over-matured sound isn’t natural.

**SM:** How do you advise your students to navigate the time between school and the start of their career?

**SS:** You don’t have to be in school, but you are always in school, if you get what I mean. You are always learning. Gurewich says, “As long as you sing, you must study.” It’s not necessarily with your teacher every week (I only got to her twice a year for a “tune-up”) but it’s very important at the beginning of your career that you have people around you that you KEEP around you, because they know your voice. Margaret Singer was my coach for 10 years. I went on every audition with her. I had a coach I worked with exclusively in Vienna, one in Berlin, one in London, one in Munich. Everywhere I went, I had a coach that knew me and one that I trusted. I find today, singers are not very discerning and they take everything that everybody says as gospel truth. They get into what I call “Band-Aid technique.” I try to get my students to learn to discern. If it doesn’t feel right, chances are it’s not right. So when somebody asks you to do something, think about it before you jump right in. I’ve seen too many young singers get into trouble from coaches who teach technique and teachers who don’t know what they are doing. And there are a lot of them. And there are teachers who are teachers for the moment who can get a result right away, but it doesn’t stick. As a singer, I was always a marathoner; I was never a
sprinter, and my technique was built on that. It was built for a marathon, not a sprint. My big soprano career didn’t start until I was 35. People thought I was much younger and were surprised I wasn’t. Gurewich told me early on that I’d sing this rep at this age, and this rep at this age, and this rep you will never sing and should never sing. One of the “nevers” was Brunhilde. When I made my world debut in Tannhäuser, she told me to be careful because “once people hear you they will want you to sing Brunhilde.” I thought she was crazy, but I had five offers within a week to sing Brunhilde. And I said, “Thank you, but I do not sing this. It’s not my voice.” I went in specifically knowing what I could sing, what I should sing and what I should not sing. This idea of singers being able to sing everything is crazy.

SM: Can you talk a little bit about repertoire for dramatic voices?

SS: I always start with the 24 Italian Songs and Arias and Purcell. After I feel they have had enough time with that repertoire, I will stretch them into Bellini or Donizetti songs. You do not learn technique from arias. The technique you learn from art song is the technique you take to arias. There is too much involved in opera arias: you have to deal with orchestras and all this other stuff. I don’t give repertoire to a singer if they cannot sing BOTH arias that are in the opera or if I don’t think they can get through the opera. I hear people sing Marguerite’s aria from Faust and they don’t have a chance of being able to sing the whole role. Marguerite is a huge voice, the third act will kill you. I don’t think it’s fair to give the singer a false impression of what they should be singing. There are more appropriate choices.

When I went on my audition tour I didn’t just have five arias, I had twelve. My experience was that when I auditioned and offered Non mi dir, they would ask, “Can you sing Or sai?” Of if I offered the Nile aria they would ask, “Can we hear Ritorna vincitor?” At least that was how it was in Europe. So when I auditioned, I had both arias from Aïda, both arias from Trovatore, both arias from Freischütz, both arias from Tannhäuser, both arias from Don Giovanni… Inevitably, they would ask for the other. Because we always offer the easy one and they wanted to hear if I could do the whole thing. So I don’t assign arias unless I think they can sing the whole thing. Now, that doesn’t mean we don’t work on them, but I would never have them do it for a jury or an audition. There are some things you can learn from them, but you
don’t learn technique from arias. Gurewich always assigned *Lieder, Melodie*, and art song. I maybe had one aria at a time with her. Bellini, Donizetti, Scarlatti, Rossini, Mozart songs. Then maybe I will assign an aria and always try to compare the aria and the song - what is similar?

I also try to create vocal exercises that relate to their songs. Gurewich always created exercises based on passages from the repertoire. So, when a student has a problem in a piece, I say, “Let’s go back to the technical work we were just doing.” And they will sing it and have no problem with the exercise. So we compare the two and it helps.

**SM:** Do you have any other thoughts on teaching? Any exercises you find particularly useful?

**SS:** I ask a lot of questions. If the student is doing something that isn’t working I will ask them, “Is this working for you? Does it feel right?” Often they will say, “Well, no.” I tell them that that should be a red flag; something isn’t right.

I also use a lot of imagery. For instance, if you want to float a feather with your air and then you want to make that feather go higher how do you do that? You have to blow your air faster to get it to go higher. How do you keep the feather floating? You have to continually blow air. As soon as the air stops, the feather drops. It’s the same way with the voice. If you want the voice to stay up in the mask and keep singing, you have to keep blowing air. And as you go up, you have to feel that the air is going through a smaller place so the frequency of that air moves faster, like a tornado. The higher you go, the faster the tornado has to move. It’s not more air, just faster air.

I tell all my sopranos, your high notes are in your tuchus. It helps you think about breathing in the back and it helps you stay grounded.

I know it sounds simplistic but it gets incredibly complicated when kids don’t know their bodies. Montserrat Caballé taught me a wonderful trick about getting a good low breath. Lie on the floor and get a big fat heavy book and put it on the stomach. Lay down, breathe, and watch the book rise and fall because you can actually see it.

As I mentioned before, I teach for a marathon, not a sprint. There are some teachers that are “in the moment” teachers. They get a big improvement in the
moment, but it doesn’t stick. I don’t teach like that. I build their breath and slowly build their stamina. As their stamina gets better, the exercises get longer. They go higher. We do a lot of scale work first, then arpeggios, then thirds. I teach them to trill. But I really don’t do anything differently between light voices and heavier voices. I do alter the repertoire, of course: lighter voices might sing Schubert, heavier voices might sing Brahms and Schumann. But other than that, I treat them the same.

SM: Thank you so much for your time and insights into teaching.