

Singers' Club Mather Competition: a conversation with Sherrill Milnes

by Daniel Hathaway



Following the Singers' Club of Cleveland's 29th Annual S. Livingston Mather Scholarship Competition for Male Voice Students on November 3, veteran Metropolitan Opera baritone Sherrill Milnes will give a free, public master class for the five winners on Sunday, November 4 at 1:00 pm in Gartner Auditorium at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

With over 650 Met performances to his credit — he and the late Montserrat Caballé both made their house debuts in Gounod's *Faust* on December 22, 1965 — Milnes continues to be a popular mentor for young singers. Together with his wife, Maria Zouves, he co-founded and runs the Sherrill Milnes VOICE Programs:

VOICExperience Foundation and the Savannah VOICE Festival, which “provide

training for aspiring young artists while fostering new audiences for the arts.”

I reached Sherrill Milnes by telephone only a day or so after he returned from a trip to China.

Daniel Hathaway: What took you to China?

Sherrill Milnes: I just judged the Ningbo International Vocal Competition for 50 singers in Ningbo, Zhejiang, near Shanghai.

DH: 50 singers! How do you remember that many performers?

SM: It's an odd thing. People will come up to you wearing jeans and T-shirts after you've seen them perform in ball gowns and formal wear and you don't recognize them. I have to ask, what did you sing?

DH: In Cleveland, you'll be holding a master class for the 5 singers who won the Mather Competition out of a field of 24 competitors. What do you concentrate on in a master class situation?

SM: I think one principle in teaching any subject — not just music — is picking your battles. You can't — at least you shouldn't — work on everything you hear. I make some decisions while they're singing. What can I give them to make them better right now? Sometimes it's about language — the schwa vowel, the nasals in French, the “ch” sounds in German. Or maybe it's about facial expression and body language — maybe they're just standing there like a blob.

It's quite different from a weekly or twice-weekly lesson in a college curriculum. There, you're investing in the future. I usually ask for a couple of choices in a master class, then I'll pick the piece I know the best and think is the most teachable. If you don't have the high notes in the Queen of the Night aria, am I going to be able to give them to you in 20 minutes? Probably not.

DH: Say a little more about facial expression and body language.

SM: People judge at least as much by eye as they do by ear. If a singer looks bored and doesn't seem involved in the text — singing syllables and words without meaning — I can see that his body isn't connected. I always have singers disappear offstage or out of sight and make an entrance. You can tell a lot from the way they walk out onstage, announce their name, and tell you what they're going to sing.

DH: What do you say to singers who always want to sound beautiful, no matter what?

SM: I think it was Verdi who said that Lady Macbeth should have an ugly sound. I think he meant she needed to use word colors, which is a huge thing. Some people produce the same sound all the way through when they should be going with the meaning of the words.

DH: Do you take much time to talk about language and pronunciation?

SM: Language is a kicker. English speakers have to be able to sing in French, German, Italian, Russian, and these days, some Czech. I always tell singers first of all that we're faking it. We're actors, and that's what actors do. The good ones — and who doesn't love Tom Hanks or Robert De Niro — make us buy it. We can't feel completely at home in a language we don't speak, but there are certain specific sounds in every language that are peculiar to that language. Be sure those sounds get out there, because the audience's perception is everything. It sounds like double-talk, but what the audience *thinks* we know is more important than *what* we know.



DH: Do you have any tips for singers about nerves?

SM: You have to be able to perform nervous. There's no such thing as no nerves. And it's much more nerve-wracking to sing in a master class than in a performance. In a performance, you can go from A to Z, not A to B to C, then back to B, and B again. You're under the microscope. Performances are longer but in some ways easier, because you have the whole curve to work with.

DH: Although you won't have this problem in Cleveland, I saw a video of you teaching a master class at the Teatro Colon in Buenos Aires with a translator — something I imagine you experienced in China as well.

SM: When I started doing this I noticed that I might talk for four or five minutes, then the translator would talk for maybe ten seconds. Wait a minute, I thought. They can't be saying what I'm saying. At some point I learned to speak about five or six words, then say 'translate.' That was easier, but also the audience was hearing their language

much more often, so they stayed with you — that was the biggest thing. So when I do translation, I try to do it in short bursts. Even when everyone is speaking English, I try to keep the audience in on whatever process is going on at the time. Another issue is with translators who are good in the languages but don't know music. If somebody isn't a singer, they don't really know what 'legato' means.

DH: In that Teatro Colon video, you also got a laugh when you suggested that singers should learn to play the piano well: "You'll save a lot of money."

SM: The old joke is, if you're not wealthy, marry your coach. To study anything is expensive, and it's expensive to hire a pianist. The better you play the piano, the faster you learn things, and it's cheaper. Singers now tend to be better musicians than a hundred years ago. When I first went to the Met, the old-timers said, don't study music, study voice. I say study music first. Play the violin, play the piano, learn to sight-read.

DH: We're looking forward to seeing you work with the Mather winners in Cleveland.

SM: I made a trip to CIM way, way, way back when Boris Goldovsky was still running the Tanglewood opera program. I heard he was auditioning and I decided to bite my lip and spend money I didn't have to fly out to Cleveland. It was worth it, so Cleveland has a place in my heart.

Portrait photo by Dario Acosta.

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