

Recovering From the Career Benz
Classical Singer Magazine, April 2004

Dear Singer,

I'm moved by your description of bouncing between optimism and pessimism in your pursuit of a singing career. I think your image of career "Bends" (what divers must guard against as they come up from the ocean floor) is a good one because it reminds us of the strategies divers use to take care of themselves. I think some of those strategies could translate well into a singer's context, making career pursuit manageable and personally growthful.

1) Divers move slowly from level to level, pausing long enough at each level for their systems to adjust to the changes in pressure. This is a healthy practice for singers as well - allowing themselves to remain long enough at each level to fully develop within the artistic activities available there, which may include student performances, studio recitals, master classes, community events, church work, training workshops, contests, self-created shows, and regional engagements.

Taking time at each level promotes full development of skills and lets singers get to trust themselves as performers. The greater sense of Self which develops through preparing for and completing performances builds confidence for moving to the next level. And because this confidence develops through real experience (the size of the venue is not a factor) including through interrelations with live audiences, the singer comes to intuitively know his/her worth in a way that differs from relying only on evaluations given by others. At times of career struggle, this experientially developed sense of artistic worth becomes an important internal support against depression.

2) While under water, divers remain tuned in to their somatic sense of well being by monitoring their breath and body sensations. Their personal instincts guide them in deciding how deep to go and how long to remain there. For singers as well, personal instincts provide essential guidance. Singers can develop their personal intuition through various self-awareness activities. These may include spiritual practice or meditation; various kinds of body work modalities, including Feldenkrais, Kinetic Awareness or yoga; peer support meetings; or personal counseling. These kinds of activities heighten the singer's sense of Self, building self-confidence as well as strategies for self care in challenging situations. Stronger self instincts allow singers to hear talent evaluations with the confidence to choose what to take to heart and what to place aside.

3) Successful divers acutely observe their under water surroundings and move sensitively in the fluid environment so as not to overstress their resources. Likewise, singers need to be alert to the details of their professional environment. Who is doing what? When? What is required in each situation? Singers need to identify which publications, courses and persons can provide expert guidance on the practical and business aspects of the field?

4) Divers have a back-up team which encourages and looks out for them, changes the oxygen tanks, steers the boat, provides maps of the territory. Since their lives are at stake under water, divers choose team members carefully, considering both the skills and sensitivity of team members. To have confidence, good professional relationships need to grow between divers and team. The more risks a diver takes, the greater trust he or she must have in the team. This trust is earned over time as the working relationship between the diver and the team develops. Singers have teams too, including teachers, coaches and mentors. Singers, too, need to have confidence in their teams and to feel that their career progress is being sincerely and expertly supported.

5) In the water, divers live in the moment. Their lives depend on it. A safe and successful dive requires alertness to their moment-to-moment decision making, their skills application, their endurance, and their passion for the activity. There is no time to stop and compare themselves to Jacques Cousteau, for they ought not to be distracted by an idealized comparison which takes attention away from their own good functioning in the here and now.

So, dear singer, as you swim in the career waters, following dual currents of artistic expression and business practicality, I urge you to let yourself be inspired by your passion for singing, to continue building your skills and endurance, to brighten and learn to trust your personal intuitive judgment, to become familiar with the business details of singing, to assemble a team which energetically supports your striving, and, most importantly, to live in the now by finding and creating singing opportunities at your present level through which you will continue to grow as the artist and human being you uniquely are.

Susan Gregory
sgregory@GestaltSing.com