

*A Tribute to*

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# George Trovillo

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*An American Maestro*

*Concert pianists are a dime a dozen, but a good accompanist is a rare find.*

by Freeman Günter and Dianne Cawood

The testimonials printed here, from singers at all levels of endeavor, indicate the truth of the above dictum. These testimonials also tell of the gratitude these singers feel at having the privilege of working with—and being guided by—Maestro George Trovillo, surely the undisputed dean emeritus of American accompanists.

Born in Lawrence, Kansas on November 6, 1913, Trovillo celebrates his birthday this month by sharing with *Classical Singer* some of his wisdom, slowly gained through years of painstaking and loving work with the great singers and teachers of his time. Jussi Bjoerling, Licia Albanese, Gladys Swarthout and many others all would freely acknowledge his contributions to the very greatness they have achieved.

A farmboy with the usual Midwestern schooling, Trovillo was encouraged by his mother to study piano. In early childhood, she taught him to read music and saw to it that he received proper piano lessons from a neighboring teacher. The family lived on a farm in Illinois, probably the only farm in its vicinity with a large collection of recordings by the opera singers of the day: Galli-Curci, Caruso, Melba and the like. By playing for singers all through high school, Trovillo developed his natural gift for accompaniment and his feeling for the repertoire. He attended Kansas University, achieved his degree and set his sights for The Juilliard School in New York. From the beginning, it was obvious that accompanying was his special strength, and he was successful at it, beginning a five-year professional association with singer Jerome Swinford while still at Juilliard. This work, private coaching in his apartment and playing for singers in the studio of vocal coach Sarah Lawrence, was interrupted by the draft in 1942. Assigned to infantry communications, Trovillo didn't touch a piano for four years. Feeling that he was learning to play all over again, he used his GI Bill to study French literature and art song with Eva Gautier, the oratorio repertoire with Charles Baker and the German repertoire with Conrad Bos, the Gerald Moore of his day.

The study paid off handsomely, and in 1949 Trovillo entered the professional "big time" with a two-year contract with tenor James Melton which included both concerts all across America and appearances in the then-fledgling medium of television, in which Melton was an early believer.



*Maestro George Trovillo, teacher, pianist, coach and confidante to several generations of great singers.*

In order to accept this extremely prestigious engagement, Trovillo had to get out of a contract with the young Eileen Farrell, temporarily thwarting what eventually was to become one of the longest and most artistically fruitful associations of both of their long careers. When he and Farrell finally got together in 1951, their association, which lasted until 1966, took them to the world's great concert halls and left a series of very important art song recordings. During his time with Farrell, in 1954 Trovillo began an association that continues to this day with Roberta Peters, then approaching the height of her tremendous fame. Their association took them to Russia in 1960 for a state-sponsored concert tour that took on historical implications in those days of the cold war.

Maestro Trovillo moved from New York to San Diego in 1966, he resides there to this day. Although Mr. Trovillo is not currently taking any new students, he is still playing, still coaching and inspiring the next generation of great singers.

All photos courtesy of George Trovillo.

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# How to Learn a New Song

A definite "keeper" from the Dean Emeritus of American accompanists, this comprehensive list illuminates the steps necessary to make any song your own and communicate it with understanding and authority. In compiling these notes, Maestro Trovillo has distilled the wisdom of a lifetime of work with the greatest singers of several generations.

by George Trovillo

## First the words...

1. First study the text to gain both a clear understanding of it and a feeling for the emotions expressed. If the text is in a foreign language, make a word-by-word literal translation, to be sure you understand the poem, the text, completely.
2. Practice speaking the text as an actor, discovering how to most effectively convey the emotions, the mood changes, the changes of tempo and dynamics.
3. Memorize the text and continue to speak it aloud.

## Then the music

1. Study the music independent of the text, for a clear understanding of the melody and the rhythms. This can be done at the piano, playing the melody and familiarizing yourself with the melody line and the rhythms.
2. Put words and music together, noting how the composer blends the mood of the poetry with the music. His dynamic marks (p, f, etc.) and



Trovillo at the piano with Eileen Farrell.

tempo fluctuations (rit., accel., etc.) as well as other specific instructions must be translated in your mind into motivated expressions. If you sing softly merely because the composer indicates "piano" or if you sing loudly just because you see a "forte" written, you will definitely "miss the boat." Always seek a motivator for the composer's "road signs."

3. At this point begin work with your accompanist or coach. Note how the song's accompaniment clarifies and intensifies the text and the melody. Finally, complete the memorizing process.

Remember that all of the above is preliminary work. Now comes the real enjoyment of giving birth to your creation, a re-creation of the composer's inspiration!

## Bringing the Song to Life

As with all music the song must flow, eternally flow, allowing no difficulties to cause a lessening in the ever-onward impetus of the rhythm. If

## George Trovillo: Accompanist, Coach and Friend

*Singers and musicians pay personal tributes to a warm and gifted man who has touched both their art and their lives.*

**A**lthough Maestro Trovillo has worked with the most famous American and international singers of his time, he has lent his talent, experience and phenomenally acute ears to dozens of singers of lesser renown as well. This series of testimonials demonstrates the variety of help he has been able to offer to singers. It also indicates the astonishing variety of the singers themselves. The first two singers quoted, Roberta Peters and Eileen Farrell, are two of the most famous and accomplished sopranos of their generations. Discovered as a young girl, Peters rose swiftly to fame as a coloratura, singing leading roles at the Met beginning in the early fifties. Recordings, concerts and television all followed swiftly, main-

taining and increasing a fame that continues to this day. Farrell, after a long career on radio and the concert stage, made the breakthrough to the operatic stage in the early sixties. Her Met debut, which attracted international attention, unleashed a dramatic soprano voice of undisputed greatness and magnitude which she was able to scale down in order to sing French melodies, German lieder, and even popular songs, all with completely convincing intimacy. Her autobiography, *Can't Help Singing*, was published last year. These sopranos, and all of the singers and pianists quoted here, volunteered these tributes specifically to *Classical Singer* to honor George Trovillo.

Roberta Peters, soprano:

"George Trovillo is my closest friend as far as my music goes, and personally. He is the greatest accompanist I have ever had. He has a wonderful ear. I always say I need that extra pair of ears to listen, a person who really hears what I am doing. I still go there to San Diego at least twice a year to work with him."

Eileen Farrell, soprano:

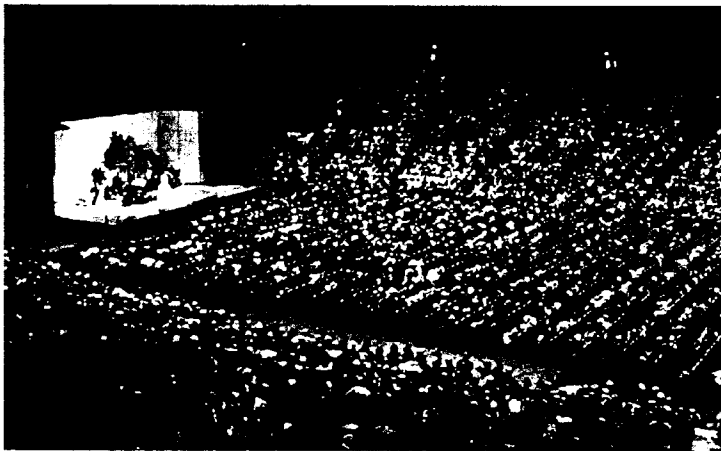
"George Trovillo is simply marvelous. He was wonderful, just wonderful, a fabulous musician. He was a great help to me and I depended on him very much. He is definitely one of the finest musicians I worked with in my entire career."

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*Above and Below: Trovillo with Roberta Peters on their history-making 1960 concert tour of Russia.*



the flow falters, the voice tries to compensate, and it begins to function with less ease. After all, life is motion: Your awareness and use of this powerful, primitive instinct is your strongest interpretive tool. Without it all else becomes more difficult. No matter how tender and calm the mood, no matter how hushed, there must always be the binding-together flow of energy that supports and stimulates the singer's intentions.

Melody always flows forward in a horizontal line. It never looks back. The rise and fall of notes on the printed page (our system of notation) is definitely an illusion. For the singer there are no high notes and no low notes, only variations in the vibration rates of the vocal cords. Consequently, to reach mentally for a "high note" or to dig for a "low note" is to interfere with the easy flow of both voice and melody.

The beginning of the song may seem difficult at times, especially if there is no introduction. Before the song begins you must know what you are going to say, and you must feel immersed in the appropriate emotion. As in speech, first comes the idea, then come forth the words to express that idea in melody. You know the tune. You know the text. Take a timed, motivated, energized breath and flow directly into the song. The song itself dictates the mood and needs of the ensuing phrase: a slow, calm breath prepares for a tenderly flowing phrase; an energetic breath intimates a more dramatic outpouring. Avoid "just taking a breath." A breath must contain matched timing, energy, and motion exactly matched to the coming phrase because it is indeed the actual physical beginning of the phrase. REMEMBER: First comes the emotionalized idea, then the emotionalized breath whose energy must flow directly into the song without a hint of hesitation. Breathe and sing. "He who hesitates is lost."

The song thus launched carries onward, ever onward to the end, each phrase flowing its energy on to the next, over melodic hills and valleys through changes of mood and tempi, until the end is finally reached and the story told.

Anna Björnson-Carson, soprano:

"George was immensely helpful in putting the finishing vocal touches on *Lucia*, my operatic debut. What a confidence builder he was at that crucial time in my career! George is a master of French Art Song and insisted on perfect pronunciation. He had the ability to demonstrate every sound correctly until I could really sing it right. One of my fondest memories: George very thoughtfully changed my coaching appointment, without telling me why, and had me arrive early. It was a session when he was working with Roberta Peters, and it gave me the opportunity to meet my great hero. What a guy!"

Tom Oberjat, tenor:

"When I first met him, George represented a connection with the greats. His association with names like Peters and

Bjoerling impressed me greatly. In time, what really got to me, was his ability to pull the best out of me. He had that rare ability to inspire and to encourage. A simple word here and there to connect one to the process of making music, and technical concerns seemed to disappear. In retrospect, George had not only a profound understanding of his craft, but a genuine interest in and concern for his students, a quality too rare in our profession. I'll never forget his genuine delight when I sang some phrase from the tenor rep and he jumped up and said how exciting it was. What else could work so well to make a young tenor sing his best!"

Dr. Frank Almond, in his 33rd year as Professor of Music and Director of Choral Activities at SDSU:

"George Trovillo, like many great pianists, enhances the per-

formance of anyone lucky enough to work with him; his touch is so exquisite that one seems to glide along on top of the sounds he creates. As a coach, his insights make interpretation easier and more vivid; as a person, his warmth and sincerity make him admirable and beloved."

Peter Duncan, tenor:

"I've been George's student for 17 years. This makes me one of the new kids on the block. George's students stay for life, unless they move away. I've been going to voice teachers and coaches since I was 15. Once I met George, I knew that he was unlike any other teacher or coach I've ever had or will have. He's completely unique. He's also completely humble. I think it's his Kansas upbringing. I went to his studio the other day, and sitting unobtrusively on the table was a CD. I picked it up.

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**Concerning Practicing**

It is important that when practicing singing (or anything else, for that matter) that we always endeavor to practice constructively and with concentrated attention. A phrase practiced incorrectly, over and over, becomes difficult to correct at a later time. The reason for this is that our conscious mind has been sending false information to our subconscious mind. It is the subconscious that controls and activates the singer's performance of the myriad details, according to the way it was trained by the conscious mind. The subconscious has no sense of right or wrong. It accepts whatever information is flashed to it by the conscious mind. Therefore, through countless repetitions the subconscious becomes conditioned to these patterns and accepts them as being correct.

It is always difficult to correct mistakes that have been "sung-in." The subconscious screams: "Let me alone! I like it the old way! You always said to do it that way!" Only by persistent correct repetition does the

subconscious relent, become reprogrammed, and accept the new information from the conscious mind.

In performance the singer's conscious mind must be free to concentrate on the "big picture," the overall concept. It should not be expected to have to cope with the thousands of small details. That is the duty, cheerfully accepted, of the subconscious.

The human mind, the world's most complex and advanced computer, is indeed a marvel beyond comprehension. Let's give it a chance!

**Concerning legato**

For the singer, "legato" is one of the most important words used to describe beautiful singing. In Italian the word legato means "tied," or "tied together." In singing, what is it that we tie together, and why is this so important? We tie successive vowels together to maintain an intensive flow of tone, vowel to vowel, with no apparent interruption by intervening

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It was a recent rerelease of recordings George had made with Eileen Farrell. Another teacher would have hung this on his wall. George let it gather dust in a corner. I'd carry his piano if I had to."

Katherine Kennedy, President, Relocation Coordinates, Inc.:  
 "George Trovillo has influenced many singers over the years. He has the unfailing ability to bring a voice and a score together to communicate emotional nuances to the listener. He also has had enormous influence on singers in choosing repertoire for their voices. Many times in my work with George, he knew that I had certain vocal qualities better suited to one song cycle than another or one aria than another. He put so many parts of the performer together: the voice, the physical attributes, the programming of the recital or the audition selections.

George has been the ears, eyes and heart for so many of us. How much richer have we been to have worked with him. One comment he made to me has been the hallmark of my efforts in everything else I have done in my life. When a singer and accompanist work together, someone has to lead. I decided then that the leader would be me! George Trovillo is to the vocal world what Fred Astaire was to dance: graceful, gifted with an ease that astounds, and always in control of his medium. The very best of George, though, is his gentle humility. That is his greatest lesson to us all."

Janie Prim, accompanist:  
 "I met George Trovillo shortly after the death of my husband, when I was trying to re-invent a musical life for myself. I had been asked by some singers who worked with George to come

to their coachings—and before long, I asked for personal help on accompanying. George gave me that, and more, encouraging me, and shining a light down a formerly dim pathway ("You are a born accompanist, Janie!") which gave me direction in my music for the first time in my life. He taught me accompanying from a singer's point of view. When I studied with Mme Gwendolyn Koldofsky—who taught me accompanying from a pianist's point of view—I was to learn that George's method proved infinitely more helpful. Whatever small successes I have had, I owe a great debt of thanks to George Trovillo—he believed in me, and showed me the way."

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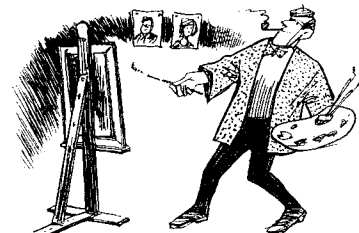
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