

Thomas Muraco: The Biography of a Collaborative Pianist, Conductor, and Vocal Coach, and His Thoughts on Preparing for Such a Career

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NOT KNOWING HIM AT ALL, but having heard much about him as a leading pianist and coach to singers in New York when I first arrived on the scene, I heard Tom Muraco play onstage for the first time from backstage in The Juilliard School Theater, where both he and I were playing for two finalists each in the Walter W. Naumburg International Vocal Competition. I was mesmerized by his elegant phrasing, his rich orchestral sound, and his technical brilliance. His was a style I had never heard before, certainly not from an accompanist. It was larger in dynamics yet never overbalanced, more robust, and, unquestionably, sharing center stage with his partners. Over the years I have heard him play many recitals for singers (including the two wonderful singers of that evening, soprano Faith Esham and bass baritone Jan Opalach) and instrumentalists alike. In any repertoire and with every partner, I find that same gorgeous sound and big-hearted style. True to each composer's style, and yet always bearing his characteristic big orchestral colors and distinctive musicality in his phrasing, he really is a conductor at the keyboard. His style of partnering, as well as his unforgettable sound, are my ideals.

Thomas Muraco was raised in a Catholic church where, starting at age 15, he became the church organist. Among his duties was to accompany a soprano who sang the parish's weddings and funerals. At the Jesuit school he attended he often played for many different types of events. His father sang constantly in the family's home; Neopolitan songs, Hoagy Carmichael tunes, and "Too-Ra-Loo-Ra-Loo-Ral" (an Irish Lullaby) were among his favorites. Tom still appears misty eyed when speaking about this memory and he credits his father with his own great love of singing. Accompanying was in Tom's blood from an early age, and, by his high school graduation, he had already studied four years of Latin, three years classical Greek, and two years of French!

At age 17 he found himself a freshman at the Eastman School of Music and student of Brooks Smith, the superb and much respected pianist who long partnered iconic violinists Jascha Heifitz and Zino Francescatti, as well as many world class singers. Later Smith became one of the first pianists to create the

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U.S.'s first formal college degree programs in collaborative piano training, at both Eastman and the University of Southern California. Since Tom had been identified in his audition as a potentially superior ensemble pianist, the choice of Brooks Smith as his teacher was a fortuitous one indeed, even though he had no idea, at age 17, who Brooks Smith was. In time, it would prove to be Smith, through strong recommendations to critical persons and organizations, who most aided the beginning of Tom's career.

Eastman gave Tom three years of German study, conversational French, and beginning Russian, the study of which he continued on his own thereafter. What magnificent early training for a career as a vocal coach! And what a linguist he is. He heard Italian dialect from birth, but studied the language diligently, as he wanted to speak without hint of any regional accent. Tom has since added the study of Portuguese to his long list. He says, "The study of languages is integral—it is at the heart of what we coaches do. It is important that you study in classes or private sessions in which no other language is ever spoken. You do not have to be fluent, but you need to have done serious grammar study and not be afraid of speaking in order to improve your pronunciation and your ear. You must be able to converse in at least Italian, French, and German."

While at Eastman, Tom learned much from Brooks Smith about style and color in sound. He learned to always make a beautiful and rich tone at the piano. He learned to be precise in rhythm and in articulation and to think of his own piano playing as that of a string player. (What kind of bow stroke do I need here? Legato, détaché, martelé, staccato, or spiccato?) Tom still laments passionately, "One cannot just play the notes. You have to articulate, as string players are taught to do." He did play then, and has played all his adult life, for some of the finest string players before the public. Tom was eager to perform the accompaniment of a song more like the less ancillary playing of sonatas or chamber music. This strong desire to play in duo is certainly at the heart of why his playing, and that is so appealing to me. He is an equal partner in all repertoire and unafraid of letting his prowess as a pianist and his imagination share equal musical responsibility. Smith once asked him how a pianist is supposed to play Brahms's magnificent song "Von ewiger Liebe" without having played his enigmatic D minor

Violin Sonata. And, when Smith was not completely pleased with Tom's performance of a particular Strauss song, he insisted Tom go immediately to the library and listen to *Salome*; the song was a precursor to the opera, a work Tom did not then know. He quickly became smitten with the score and made crucial connections from all Strauss songs to his operas and sonatas. And so, that broadly based kind of study has remained his protocol for learning all music.

From Eastman's German Professor, Dr. Jessie Kneisel, Tom not only had the advantage of a superior and demanding teacher of the language, but of one who taught lyric diction also. The example of her passionate love of lieder and her introduction to the greats of lieder singing—Fischer-Dieskau, Wunderlich, Ludwig, Schwarzkopf, and others whose recordings she played in class—Tom says, were perhaps what touched him more than learning the actual language. Dr. Kneisel always *beamed*, he says, when she listened to lieder. It was the way she loved it—with a beatific face and total unawareness of anything but that to which she was listening. The Jessie Kneisel Prize in German Lieder, created in 1982 by former student George McWhorter (BM '57), has been given annually to outstanding vocalists and collaborative pianists at Eastman since then and continues to mark the transformative and abiding influence of her teaching. She was a major inspiration to Tom, who has thrilled to return as often as possible to judge his mentor's competition.

When Tom was not quite 19, Brooks Smith saw to it that he received a scholarship to The Aspen School and arranged for him to play in the studios of American soprano Adele Addison and Russian-born American mezzo Jenni Tourel. Addison had the *deepest* connection to emotion of both poet and composer that Tom had ever experienced up to that time. Tourel, herself a polyglot and famed singer, was an inspiring coach, but fearsome in her old school "put down" as a part of her teaching style. It was her inspirational and charismatic singing of Russian that inspired Tom to begin his own serious Russian language study. He developed very close professional relationships with these two great artists starting in that first Aspen summer (1969) and for a total of 11 years there, the first three as a student, and the last eight as a faculty member. When Tom moved to New York in 1972, both Addison and Tourel themselves coached their own repertoire with Tom and he coached many of their

students. Tom speaks lovingly of Addison's artistry and of their deep friendship. He also rapidly developed a noted recital career that continues today. He has partnered many instrumental recitalists, including violinist Robert Mann, founding member of The Juilliard String Quartet, whom Tom credits with teaching him how to play and characterize music without words, and also to know what rhythm is to music. With famed cellist Zara Nelsova he played countless recitals over many years, and also recitals with noted flutist and conductor Ransom Wilson, and with The American String Quartet (often playing sonata recitals with first violinist, Peter Winograd) who are his colleagues at Manhattan School of Music, among many other partnerships. Tom has performed with a host of singers, including years of recitals with American soprano Faith Esham, a whole North American season of *Liederabende* with German baritone, Hermann Prey, a long and satisfying recital partnership with Canadian dramatic tenor Ben Heppner (which started at Carnegie Hall on less than two weeks' notice in a very big recital program, including Sibelius songs that Tom did not know), and American bass baritone John Cheek, who recently spoke to me of Tom's large impact on him. They met when The Ravinia Festival invited John to do a Martin Theater recital and wanted John to do it with Thomas Muraco, who was a faculty member of Ravinia's Steans Institute for Young Artists. As it happened, they lived just seven blocks from each other in New York. Of their first rehearsal in Tom's apartment studio John said, "From the first notes he played, I thought, 'Oh, wow!' The beauty of his tone, his musicianship, the sense of line, color—all those things you get from only the very best—he really spoiled me." Many concerts, including numerous performances of Schubert's *Winterreise*, ensued, and the two continued to perform and coach often together. John even once asked Tom to go to Nice, where John was spending several months, to help him prepare his first *Don Carlo*. I can appreciate how Tom's elegant, and dramatic Italian would be that which John wanted to guide him in his preparation for such a role as Verdi's King Philip II. John went on, "All Tom's languages are absolutely excellent, but another of Tom's gifts is that he not only knows all the languages, *he knows how to teach people to sing in the languages.*" [These italics are mine, but mirror the importance John Cheek placed upon those words.] "I always felt my French was weak compared to

my Italian and German. Tom worked really carefully with me to get me out of my fears and to really be able to *sing* the language." I personally have always felt that I could best serve singers by being either their recital partner or their studio coach, but not both. John's words attest to what I have always known about Tom. His coaching, like his playing, whether linguistic or poetic or interpretive, does not restrict or insist upon its way. It is generous. It opens and enlarges and gives inspiration. This is a rare gift to be able to give to one's partners.

The singer who perhaps most affected Tom Muraco's ideal in his teaching, coaching, and performing, and certainly touched him in the many concerts he did with her over many years, was the Canadian contralto Maureen Forrester. Tom says, "She was one of the most moving singers I ever partnered. She could make you believe she was 15 or 75. She embodied that which she sang and delved into the soul of each poem and character. I learned much about risking from her. She risked everything when she sang. It was as if she had lived everything she was singing to you. She got under your skin and into your soul." She made Tom cry sometimes onstage, especially when she sang Jerry Herman's "And I was Beautiful," a favorite encore. "In her song singing, she reached the pinnacle of artistry through her humanity."

Although Tom Muraco met the young, if already acclaimed conductor James Conlon at Aspen in 1969, they did not work together until some time later. Early in Conlon's tenure as Music Director of the famed Cincinnati May Festival, he invited Tom to assist him there. Now one of the world's foremost conductors, Conlon is beloved and respected for his vast and varied performances of symphonic, operatic, and choral repertoire, but also for his sense of social responsibility that reaches into his repertoire choices as well as his public speaking and writing. Conlon was Music Director of the Cincinnati May Festival from 1979 to 2016, perhaps the longest tenure ever of any director of an American classical organization. He now enjoys the Cincinnati May Festival's title of Music Director Laureate. I asked Maestro Conlon, "Why Tom? What was there about him that made you want him specifically to join you at the May Festival?—and for 13 years; quite a tenure." His answer was what I knew it would most probably be: "Because he's a really terrific pianist, he's a fine linguist and a wonderful coach who was able to work effectively

with the soloists. He is a superb musician and has really great ears; I knew I could rely on his recommendations to me from his listening, out in the hall, during rehearsals.”

In 1993, Thomas Muraco accepted a position at Manhattan School of Music, thoroughly eager to share all he had learned from his own exciting performing and vocal coaching career. He already had taught at international festivals as well as at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, and loved working with pianists as well as singers. But at the Manhattan School, there was a collaborative piano department in which pianists were honing their skills for careers that, so they hoped, might resemble Tom’s, and those students really interested him. He was now in Brooks Smith’s position of mentoring, training, and molding talented but inexperienced students such as he had been, it seemed, not so long before. I remember how excited everyone was at MSM when Tom joined the excellent school and fine department.

Having determined at MSM that operatic training for many collaborative pianists was lacking, as it almost always is in collab programs of study, and believing that all pianists must play for conductors as well as learn to reduce orchestral scores, he created a seminar, the Opera Repertoire Ensemble. To date he has prepared and led over 20 complete operas, in original languages, in public performances of standard repertoire, with this ensemble. What a wonderful idea! Singers throng to the seminar as a way of learning standard roles they need to know under the baton of an exacting conductor, long steeped in their repertoire. The pianists make two-piano reductions of each entire score *by themselves*, but must please Tom Muraco’s knowing ear in the long hours and many sessions he spends listening to and commenting on their efforts before ever going into rehearsals. I have been told by students that Tom’s voice goes an octave higher in protest if he does not hear correct voicing or if the right hand is too high, not the right color, too loud, or if a prominent solo instrument’s part is missing; and, heaven forbid that the bass be thin and unsupported. This challenging assignment teaches one to hear orchestrally, to be able to automatically recreate the color and richness they hear in their “orchestral ears” into their own fingers’ touch at the piano. This exercise will positively affect a pianist’s sound in all they do. He or she will take the lesson far beyond this experience, for all time, in all repertoire. Tom insists that all MSM

collabs or piano majors bitten by the collaborative bug must work with an operatic conductor and also conduct themselves. All collab majors at MSM are required to take a conducting class.

Tom Muraco credits Jeaneane Dowis, whom he met at Aspen, with teaching him technical discipline as well as physiopianistic understanding. A famed teacher of her time, Tom says she was a tough pedagogue who had his best interests at heart. Also at Aspen, when Tom was 21, he met 30 year old conductor, John Nelson, at Aspen, that wonderful festival and site of so many introductions to those who later became professional colleagues and friends. John conducted a concert version of *Fidelio* and Tom played for rehearsals. They became fast friends and Tom played many seasons of rehearsals for Nelson, even as far away as Paris and Japan. Many years later, after going to MSM to hear a *La bohème* performance (with four Mimis) of Tom’s Opera Repertory Ensemble, John Nelson complimented his friend and then told him, “You have inspired these kids! But you have to get your arms out of the air! You must study! You have David Gilbert right here at MSM, a brilliant teacher and technician!” Tom did indeed study with Gilbert, former Assistant Conductor of the New York Philharmonic in Pierre Boulez’s tenure, and found in him a truly great and effective teacher who taught through both repertoire and exercises. He encouraged Tom to play on the keyboard and then transfer what he felt in his hands into a conducting pattern. He said, “You have the advantage. You play these scores and you can sing them.” Tom studied *recitativo accompagnato* with Gilbert. The difficulties of actually starting and stopping the orchestra at the appropriate place in recitative is not only complicated, but the stories of mishaps in performances of even seasoned singers and conductors are legend. Tom says now that he feels his evolution as a musician was not really completed, or that he had been lopsided so to speak, until he had studied conducting. Only then did he find command over the music and ability to transmit his desired message to singers and orchestras. It is no surprise to me to note that many of Tom’s students have gone on to noted careers as assistant conductors or operatic pianists themselves. Others are on coaching staffs of schools of music. His influence and passion for operatic singers and singing are infectious, and his legacy as a teacher is large. Tom himself has gone on to enjoy a fine operatic conducting

career in North America and Europe. In 1987, he assisted Leonard Bernstein in the New York rehearsals, and traveling to Rome, Italy for the performances, of Puccini's *La bohème*. This was a life changing experience, Tom says. He adored Puccini, and to see the blatant passion, brilliance as a conductor, and deep soul connection of the titan for the master's music, greatly influenced and affected Tom. Years later, Tom would leave New York for a season as Studienleiter-Kapellmeister at Theater Bremen, Germany, where he conducted Goldmark's *Merlin* and Verdi's *Nabucco*. I had the privilege of teaching his MSM students that year and learned much about Tom, *in absentia*, as a masterful pedagogue. His students were talented, disciplined, curious, imaginative, and self-challenging.

As John Cheek told me, and I already well knew from years of observation, Tom Muraco is a master coach. No matter the language or the composer—be it opera, song, oratorio, ensemble, or solo—he knows it and plays it. He knows how to organize his time in a coaching, for he ferrets out in one read-through, or less, exactly what each singer needs him most to address. As I have already indicated, he frees singers, he makes them feel so good about themselves that he often helps them do things they did not know they could do. He always tells them what is good and then he so kindly and encouragingly works with them to improve that which is not as good. His standards are high. His sessions are always fun, even if he is serious about the goal. He knows the repertoire and, important for all coaches but characteristic of only a few, knows what repertoire will be just perfect for an individual artist's growth as well as voice.

I would like to share a treasure from my own coach's toolkit, a huge and favorite gift from Tom Muraco, that comes from one of many memorable master classes he gave at the Steans Institute for Young Artists' Vocal Program in the early 2000s. A very good light lyric soprano sang a spirited Wolf song. She sang well and her diction was intelligible if not idiomatic. She had done her homework and she and her singing were charming. Still, the song did not touch us or tell a story to which we could respond. It was a lovely museum piece on the shelf. We admired it. Tom thanked her and told her what was lovely about her performance; then simply asked her to mime! He instructed her to make a gesture for *every* word, as if she were trying to communicate through gesture to a deaf

audience, and to make her chosen gesture at the exact time she sang its word. He asked us, the audience, to try not to laugh, as this could be funny to observe, for he did not care if the gesture chosen looked silly or even ridiculous. In the moderately fast tempo of the piece, and in the largely syllabic setting, there were many words to mime quickly. He asked for a slightly slower tempo, and told her that he simply was asking her to show him that she had defined each word to herself before she sang it. She giggled for a moment, then turned from us to compose herself, turned back to us and began. What happened next was amazing. She gestured, sometimes wildly, but she gestured almost every descriptive word of the German text, proving that she indeed knew the meaning of each German word very well, indeed, but more importantly, she *delivered to us* the meaning of each word, not just the word itself. And it wasn't that her diction was better. It was just inspired by the visual gesture she used to show us what the word meant! Her singing came alive—and so did we. At the song's end, when she feigned collapse on the stage, we rose to our feet, screaming and yelling over our applause. And when Tom asked her then to stand still and sing the song again, it was still transformed by the memory of her own miming. Try this yourself. It is not easy, but it can be transformative. Thank you, Tom!

In closing, I quote Tom's instructions to pianists desirous of careers as vocal coaches.

Have patience or develop patience. Singers need us to be patient. They must be safe in our studios, free to experiment in a supportive, unhurried atmosphere. Don't try to impress a singer with what you know. Yes, know a lot about song, opera, and oratorio, but don't try to impress. Have a voracious appetite for the repertoire. Have a psychology to help fearful singers. Singing can be frightening. Singing is much harder than playing the piano. Sing in your coaching sessions. Learn all the languages you can. Learn everything you can about each language. Learn styles and learn to talk about styles. All styles. Learn to be descriptive as you speak to singers. Paint verbal pictures for them. If you know a great deal about a great deal you will have the breadth of knowledge to play well while listening to your singers and to the music you both make together. Be consumed by music: vocal, instrumental, operatic, and symphonic repertoire—all of it. It will give you context and comfort in your musical life and in those of your partners and students; and it will feed your soul.