

## An Interview with Neil Semer

Adele Nisbet

Neil Semer was a Keynote Presenter at the ANATS National Conference held in Sydney in 2004. His masterclasses were popular with the delegates and the work demonstrated inspiring to those in attendance. Adele Nisbet caught up with Neil in Brisbane a few days after the conference.



**AN:** *Well, you had 10 days of teaching and giving master classes, and just given yet another master class. I have to say that format is obviously something that you have become very good at. You seem to have a great clarity of purpose. Tell me about how you have arrived at this place and your obvious gift for conducting master classes.*

**NS:** By giving master classes, I get to do so many interesting things. I get to work with both the mechanics and the artistic side of singing. I'm able to work with different singers, different repertoire and styles and different languages. I love these various possibilities and deeply enjoy the master class venue. I have two pedagogical goals in master classes. The first is to give as full a view to the public of what optimal mechanics and vocal artistry are. The second is to give the performer a clear understanding of how to address technical issues that have yet to be solved, and ideas of ways they can deepen their artistry. I try to present it all as entertainingly as possible. Music shouldn't be boring or purely academic! As to how I arrived here: I realised long ago that my greater gift was as a teacher than singer. I was given many gifts. By nature (and training) I'm a good musician, linguist,

actor and psychologist. I love intense one-on-one interaction and have a poetic and passionate nature for words and music. After a certain point it became painfully clear to me that musically speaking, my wings could never really fly, due to the basically limited vocal material God had granted me. I took stock of my gifts and realised that they pointed to a career in teaching. By the time I came to this, I was already teaching (and loving it!), but only then realised that it wouldn't be a side line to my singing, but rather 'the main event'. From the clarity this decision brought my teaching career broadened greatly and soon included teaching and giving master classes internationally. Only later did I realise that I love giving master classes at least as much as I ever enjoyed singing publicly. I think it's this love of giving them that keeps my classes vital, informative and fun.

**AN:** *Where did you get your first inspiration for what you now understand about vocal mechanics?*

**NS:** My education began with going to countless performances as a standee at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in the 1970s. I would also listen to the recordings of the great artists from the beginning of recorded history to the present. It was what I heard and experienced through those earlier generations of recording, and the best of the generation that was still singing publicly in the 70s that now forms the basis of what I teach. The standard of singing back then, particularly in the romantic 19th century repertoire was higher. I was attracted to that style of singing, due to its visceral thrill and depth of connection.

**AN:** *What do you mean by 'connection'?*

**NS:** I think that people were more individual, and filled with highly charged emotional substance, rather than the surface gloss (albeit attractive) that we are more likely to see and hear today.

**AN:** *You talk about Lamperti. What sort of influence has he been on your teaching?*

**NS:** I've read that book I don't know how many times.

**AN:** *That is ...?*

**NS:** 'Vocal Wisdom'. The maxims of Giovanni Battista Lamperti, edited by William Earle Brown.

**AN:** *I know that book (laughs).*

**NS:** It's a book that has no vocal science in it, but an incredible basis of artistic philosophy applied to singing. What I have endeavoured to do is take that philosophy, flesh it out with modern understanding of vocal science, and teach that.

**AN:** *Would you say that you have always been someone, even as a student, who sought out and was interested in other peoples ideas and tussled with them to form your own basis of understanding?*

**NS:** Absolutely! I always had a very intense need to know about singing. One might say that my passion about singing is extreme. It has always answered a deep need within me.

**AN:** *If someone wants to be a singer today, what do they need to do? Is it firstly a connection that they find or a passion for music?*

**NS:** I think that you either have the passion or you don't. The physical connection can be taught, and I think that our job as teachers is to do so.

**AN:** *Tell me how you do this.*

**NS:** I work very much from the body, heart and ear. Body awareness, emotional awareness and in-depth listening are all essential. Lamperti says that our sense of touch organises us mechanically and our sense of hearing organises us musically. I think that is logical and well put.

**AN:** *One of the students asked a question in the master class last night which I'd like to follow up on. What do you think about the students learning the physiology and anatomy of singing?*

**NS:** I think it is useful, however, it is quite possible to become a great singer with no knowledge of physiology. I think it is more important for teachers to know this information than students. Certainly, if a student has interest and that sort of inquiring intellect they should learn it, but it's important to know that it's not useful at the moment of singing. It is useful, however, in reflection afterwards. The singer can then identify strategies for improvement. In the moment of singing, giving yourself commands or instructions will absolutely stop spontaneity and simple, unified musical functioning. Singing has to be a sensuous, emotional and/or spiritual experience at its base — not an intellectual one.

**AN:** *How do you help students achieve their best performances, to achieve this sense of spontaneity or 'now'?*

**NS:** Well, for one thing I think that you have to realise that there is nothing to be achieved — only something to inhabit. I get people to be 'in the now' by feeling their body at that present moment, feeling their emotions at the present moment, imagining the

sound they wish to emit at that present moment. They must commit to imagining in incredible detail what they wish to hear and feel, rather than be in the past by judging what they have just done or in the future fearing what they are about to do.

**AN:** *If I were to paraphrase what I think you are saying, it is trusting our ability 'to be' rather than 'to do'.*

**NS:** Yes, and I am concerned that we use the verb 'be' rather than 'should' or 'should be'. The verb 'to suppose to' is tyrannous!

**AN:** *Okay (laughs). Bel canto — there are a lot of teachers that would claim that they teach bel canto style.*

**NS:** Actually every teacher I have ever met (laughs)

**AN:** *So if I said to you, please justify your label as a bel canto teacher, what is your response?*

**NS:** To me bel canto means (apart from the obvious 'beautiful singing') deep connection with the body, a balance of chiaro and scuro, the ability to effortlessly sing legato, execute portamenti, staccati, flexibility, clean onset and offset, mezza di voce, accurate and poetic usage of language, the basic skills — well not so basic skills — of a fine singer. I believe that I am adept at teaching these important abilities. Great singing is not just based on raw talent but on musical elegance and refinement.

**AN:** *How would you define the role of the breath?*

**NS:** Well, the breath is our power supply, our gas tank. I teach what Lamperti described as pelvic control of the breath. The lungs and air are in the thorax, meaning from the diaphragm up. However, the control of the air is in the pelvis, meaning from the diaphragm down. So I work on the kind of breath control that is controlled from the pelvic floor up to the diaphragm, of course assisted by correct alignment.

**AN:** *Is there any differentiation between the way the air flows and the way the air is pressurised?*

**NS:** Yes — air flow and air pressure are two opposing forces that have to be brought into balance. I would say that the use of the diaphragm and the muscles supporting the diaphragm assist in regulating pressure and the pelvic floor assists in regulating flow.

**AN:** *It seems to me that we all give lip service to needing to getting the voice on the breath*

**NS:** ... and it seems to me we give lip service to the concept of getting the breath controlled low, although very few people seem to have a clear physical understanding of what that exactly means.

**AN:** *Does Lamperti have anything to offer here?*

**NS:** No, there is very little physical information in Lamperti, but he does talk about pelvic control of the breath all the time.

**AN:** *So the role of the student is to actually go on their own journey, their own physical journey to become aware of their own bodies.*

**NS:** Without question. Knowledge from books is useless until sensuously experienced in the body of the individual singer.

**AN:** *You have spoken of the book, *The Power of Now*, We had an interesting exercise where you ask the student to slowly relax the jaw, the back of the pharynx, the tip of the tongue ...*

**NS:** Well, actually I didn't ask him to relax the jaw. I asked them 'to be aware of' the jaw. I asked him to do no action and without doing anything, to be aware of 'what is'. And again, I am concerned with the verb 'to be' rather than 'supposed to'. So I first want him to get involved in 'what is'. Only when one is clearly in 'what is' can one affect change to more optimal function. One can only plot a clear course to something when one knows where one already is.

**AN:** *That's a very good starter – obviously where a lot of work has to begin*

**NS:** Absolutely, and it's the place where most people retreat from in their perfectionism, in their fear, in their intellectualism and their judgmentalism.

**AN:** *I guess some singers never find that point of departure for their singing.*

**NS:** They are so busy being perfect — they don't think they can take a perfect leap so they won't take the first single step.

**AN:** *You've touched on many core ideas for teaching singing. How long have you been teaching?*

**NS:** About 22 years.

**AN:** *Over that time, you have probably grown and changed, language has changed too. Is change a challenge you have embraced?*

**NS:** I think our job as teachers is to be really clear. A lot of language commonly employed is rather imprecise. It leaves students trying to guess or figure something out. Honestly, I want the student to spend their time working out their own bodies and emotional and musical natures. My job is to create clarity, and hopefully to help find shortcuts.

**AN:** *There is a school of teaching that employs a lot of imagery ...*

**NS:** I am not of that school. I try to give accurate, clear information on the physical, acoustic, emotional, musical and linguistic levels. If an image arises in the singer — great — because then that image is meaningful and personal to the singer. Even then, I would try to make sure that the singer

does not become stuck on the image. Feelings and images often change as a person develops. Technique is what we do, images are what sometimes happen.

Very often I will get a person to do something technically; they will do it well and a certain sound results. The foolish or unenlightened student will then try to recreate the same result (being in the past) rather than commit to the process (which makes one be in the present), thereby creating only tension and frustration. My job is to keep the person really aware of inhabiting the process. The process creates the result. Going for the result doesn't create the result.

**AN:** *Coming back to your ability and the students ability to focus on the process; I observe that as a teacher, you have great patience and persistence. Did you learn this? Is it deliberate behaviour on your part?*

**NS:** Persistence I had from nature. Patience has come from getting older, more experienced, recognising the futility of putting someone else on my timetable. I believe that I generally see people with clarity — what people can do, what is possible. I would consider it a betrayal of that student to just give in to their own worst fears and self-imposed limitations. My job is to persist and lead them to their own most interesting and exciting artistry.

**AN:** *Many teachers of singing are afraid of being boring and repetitive. So it seems to me that this is advice to all teachers.*

**NS:** I think that we just need to speak our truth. That is what it really comes down to. If you're asking for some important thing and the student doesn't do it, we owe it to the student to say so. The student is paying us and investing their hopes and dreams in us. Either the student has to commit to doing it, or I need to find a better way to get them to do it. If the relationship isn't working, it might be necessary to part company. No one is for everyone.

**AN:** *... I am the last person to suggest that we should all be teaching the same way, after all we bring different personality and experience to the job, but maybe we should be trying to pick up some of those pedagogical approaches which encourage us to be more honest with our students.*

**NS:** I don't teach, at this point, in an institution. That allows me a greater independence to say what I believe. I work mostly with professionals whose livelihoods depend on their ability to function at a high professional level. We can't take on inappropriate responsibility for our students, because that is not possible or healthy. At the same time I have to say that I feel deeply for many of these people who entrust me with their talent. I am grateful for that trust, and am honoured by it. It is my job to do the best by them and that includes sometimes approaching uncomfortable situations with the larger good of their artistry and career in mind.

**AN:** *Have you any inspiring stories of young singers that you have worked with, helping set up or recover their careers?*

**NS:** Sure. I work with an incredibly gifted mezzo, Ursula Hess von den Steinen, who I started working with when she was engaged at the Dresden Stage Opera. She was about to make her debut at the Paris Opera, yet I felt it necessary to change her technique quite a bit. She had a very dark covered vocal production when we first started. I worked on developing more squillo, a much more brilliantly focused tone. This was not only a technical change, but also a change of artistic identity and energy. The work was progressing; she was gifted and worked hard, but on some levels she wasn't convinced this was the right way to go. Her husband came to a lesson and heard her sing a little bit. She looked at him and said 'Well Ralf, what do you think?' And he just looked at her and said 'Guile', a German word which in slang means, Wow baby, Fantastic, Far Out! And from that moment on things just zoomed. She developed this incredible flexibility and her true musicality started to pour out. Someone else, Christian Elsner, who has a big concert career in Europe — he is a very fine artist, studied with Dieskau, and has sung with many very fine orchestras around the world. He never really had a great top and he never really had what I call an Italianate cantilena; he used a very German school approach. He already had a fine career by the time we met, but did not understand what legato was in the Italian sense of the word. He had the courage to commit midcareer to a radical change of technical ideas. It felt strange to him for a long while, but he was smart and not overwhelmed by his ego. He was able to recognise that it was a superior way of singing than his older habitual one. All of a sudden he could do things like Radames. He always thought that he couldn't have an Italian sound and vocally there it was — he had a 'Eureka' moment. Allyson McHardy, with whom I've been working for 10 years, just received word that she will sing Rosina at the San Francisco Opera in '06, and make her New York City Opera debut this fall. I'm thrilled to have seen her through all these phases of her development! Eugene Brancoveanu started with me when he was 17, went on to star on Broadway in Baz Luhrman's 'Boheme' as Marcello, and is now an Adler Fellow at the San Francisco Opera. I expect great things will continue to come for him.

**AN:** *Do you hear some of the best singers today in the opera houses actually presenting with this Italianate tone colour?*

**NS:** I think it is on the wain. God, I'm missing Domingo already! However, we live in a time where there is a lot of really high level Mozart, Handel, and Rossini singing. It seems to be the age of the smaller, flexible voices.

**AN:** *... which is surprising because it's the age of the big concert halls and orchestras too. Are we going back to the chamber size works?*

**NS:** Well the Operas that are successfully done currently tend to be the early operas. The grand romantic operas do not fare very well nowadays. There are only a number of voices that can handle them. In the 50s there were any number of world class *Il Trovatore*s in several different theatres around the planet. These days I don't know if there is a single one that could put on a first class production of *Il Trovatore* in which every role is cast with someone who is really superb. I certainly haven't seen it. Luckily, I have recordings of those great people of the past who were really seminal in the development of my ear for what great singing is.

**AN:** *You live in New York, so there is the constant opportunity to attend one of the best opera houses in the world.*

**NS:** My earliest training came about by being one of those fanatical standees at The Met and going to the public library and listening to recordings with their scores in my hand. I was listening almost every day.

**AN:** *This is a common story from musicians who have developed a reliable inner sense of hearing. It seems so important to encourage singers to listen.*

**NS:** Every other bit of knowledge means nothing if you do not have the ear. And the difficulty is that people do not know what they are *not* hearing until they can hear better

**AN:** *So what was the last great experience you had as an audience member in a theatre?*

**NS:** Unfortunately, for the last number of years I have been travelling and teaching so much internationally I don't get to go to performances at The Met very often.

**AN:** *Then maybe there are some wonderful past experiences that have stayed in your memory.*

**NS:** Well, yes! I saw Tebaldi's last concert in New York, I saw Magda Olivera's concerts in Carnegie Hall, Dieskau's last concert in Carnegie Hall, I saw many of Marilyn Horne's great concerts and performances at The Met — she was a major love of mine, as was Pavarotti. I loved their approach to technique. I studied what they did and said about singing. They helped me develop my own pedagogical ideas. And from the past, Ponsell, Warren, Boerling, Bidu Sayao, Pinza, Callas, Sutherland.

**AN:** *Sayao is not very well known here — her recordings not easily accessible.*

**NS:** The Bachianas Bazillieros was written and dedicated to her. Try getting her recordings on the internet.

**AN:** *You live in New York, but as you said, you travel so much; Germany is another significant place that you teach.*

**NS:** I teach on a regular basis in Berlin, Dresden, Cologne, Frankfurt, Paris, London, Toronto and of course, in my home city, New York.

**AN:** *What was the original connection to Germany? Did you perceive a need? Was it anything to do with the prevalence of young American singers who seek career experience there?*

**NS:** Although there were one or two American singers that originally took me there, actually I teach mostly German singers there. However, I do think that there is a real need for my particular way of working. It doesn't seem so readily available over there.

**AN:** *Does this reflect the fact that over the decades, the German School departed somewhat from the Italian bel canto approach?*

**NS:** Yes, although most German teachers will tell you they teach Italian bel canto. Whether you would agree with that statement based on the sound that you hear coming from their studios is another matter.

**AN:** *You teach in France too — do you have any theories about why, looking at the big picture, not as many good singers have emerged from France?*

**NS:** I think that any language that is sung in the classical genre has to be Italianised. Current French style is to not do that. They insist that French be sung as it is spoken on the street, most particularly in relation to the uvular 'R'. Great singing is a balance of musical and linguistic considerations, not the dominance of one over the other.

**AN:** *Europe was the hub of the singing world for so long. So many singers felt that they had to train there for credibility. Is that still so?*

**NS:** Not at this point. The second World War was the turning point for Europe losing some of their cultural predominance. America has become the repository of much great European culture of the 19th century.

**AN:** *Have you any comment on language?*

**NS:** I speak several languages. I work with people quite a lot on language and one pedagogical principle that I strongly believe in is that singing is musicalised speech; it is not just sound. Clear, unfussy diction, spoken on pitch on a well regulated air stream gives meaning to singing.

**AN:** *Your first love is classical singer but you also teach Broadway performers. How is this the same and how is it different?*

**NS:** Well it depends on what you mean by 'same'. I certainly approach music theatre with the same mechanical basis. In classical and nonclassical singers that I have worked with, the only difference is in registration. But issues of alignment, open throat, pelvic control of breath, clear vowels, crisp consonants, registration or passaggio events — I deal with them in the same way but apply it to the different repertoire.

**AN:** *There is a school of nonclassical singing that is called 'speech level singing'.*

**NS:** The old bel canto saying 'si canta come si parla' has been around for hundreds of years. 'One sings as one speaks' — that is if one speaks well, of course. The school of nonclassical singing that uses that statement has found a good marketing tool, but is simply reiterating a healthy vocal principle known (if not always adhered to) for centuries.

**AN:** *So when singing with attention to the inflection of the speech, the musical style can often lack legato.*

**NS:** While vocalising a musical theatre singer, I work on the kind of cantilena that I employ classically for the purpose of vocal develop. My job is to provide tools that help the singer develop. Good alignment, legato and low, controlled breath never hurt anyone. I teach an open throat and a low floating larynx. When a person sings certain styles might their larynx be somewhat higher? The answer is probably 'yes'. However one does not need to work on raising the larynx the way certain schools promote. The larynx rises up very easily, as any classical singer knows. Does one often sing with less legato in nonclassical styles? Of course. My experience is that when a person has a love of a particular style and a gift for it, appropriate phrasing is not an issue. I teach an open throat and leave stylistic considerations to the individual artistic.

**AN:** *You would suggest that a high larynx is the physical reaction to the artistic need for tone colour?*

**NS:** Absolutely.

**AN:** *You work on what you call tracheal resonance. Is that related to tracheal pull?*

**NS:** I believe so.

**AN:** *In other words this creates a stabilisation of the larynx with an emphasis on flexibility, not tension.*

**NS:** Tracheal resonance helps to release tension in the vocal folds. I think mask resonance is a separate issue. Many singers understand the preyawn gesture to open the throat but still do not employ tracheal resonance.

**AN:** *It seems that you could use the idea of the sob here.*

**NS:** The sob is certainly close to it. It has a lot to do with a deep emotional release; it has to do with getting in contact with expression leading vocalisation rather than vocalisation as simply a sound that is not connected to different parts of the person. A deep sigh ...

**AN:** *I can identify this as similar to the way I use fry, to release any intrinsic tension at laryngeal level.*

**NS:** ... and the people who are very 'sound' oriented generally find this difficult whereas the people who are more 'expression' oriented find it much easier.

**AN:** *You work with professional young adults who need someone to give them direction. You are very aware of the struggles young performers face. What is your advice to the aspiring singer? What do they need, what should they do?*

**NS:** Well, you need fantastic gift, intelligence, a support system,

**AN:** *What do you mean by a support system?*

**NS:** Friends, family, partners, financial support, emotional support. You also need 'the need to do it'.

**AN:** *And if that need to do it isn't strong enough?*

**NS:** I would say sing for your pleasure, sing for your local church, sing in local productions. To be a professional you need to bring passion to it, to have the energy to see you through the many obstacles in your path

**AN:** ... *the lack of money, frequent travel, absences from those you love ...*

**NS:** ... and also, you need to know things about yourself. Are you a person who likes to travel? Are you a person who can stand not having your partner with you if you travel? Are you able to work things out so that you are able to travel with your partner? I know people who are husband and wife teams who are singer and accompanist so that they work it out that way. Can you enjoy the lifestyle of a musician, or will it make you feel lonely, isolated and unhappy? I don't tell any singer that they 'must sing'... The reality is that there are very few jobs and it's a brutal life unless you want it desperately.

**AN:** *Perhaps there is not enough value placed on the individual who choses not to venture down that path.*

**NS:** I honestly think there are not enough amateur musicians around. Before television or radio, people would stay home and make music. They would sing, play instruments and songs around the piano. There would be soirees and musicales. Let's bring that back.

**AN:** *It occurs to me that the ANATS conference encouraged us to reflect on the emotional satisfaction we all get out of singing. That final session*

*when, sitting in the auditorium, we all sang in canon, creating ostinato, singing in multiple parts, being creative within a prescribed pattern, it was fun just to make music without reference to the learned sophistication of the formal art.*

**NS:** And these are the people who are keeping the love of music alive; they are the people who are developing audiences. God bless them!

**Neil Semer** teaches voice and gives workshops internationally on the subject of vocal technique and performance practice. His main voice studio is in New York. He teaches regularly in Toronto, Paris, London, and throughout Germany as well. His teaching combines the old Italian School of Bel Canto as expounded by Giovanni Battista Lamperti with scientific understanding of vocal function. The focus is coordination of the heart, mind and body. His students sing leading roles in opera around the world and star in Broadway productions. In July 2004, he was the keynote speaker and master teacher for the Australian National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS) Convention in Sydney. Masterclasses given around the world include the 5th International Congress of Voice Teachers in Helsinki, Royal Academy of Music and the Association of English Singers and Speakers in London, two National Conventions of the National Association of German Singing Teachers (Hamburg and Wurzburg), the Leipzig, Hannover and Wurzburg Hochschulen, Swiss Voice Teachers Association in Zurich, Australian NATS Chapters in Sydney and Brisbane, Queensland and Newcastle Conservatoriums, two Canadian Voice Care Foundation Symposia in Toronto and Banff, NATS National Convention in Seattle, NATS Winter and Summer Workshops in Miami, Princeton and New York, NATS New England, Mid-Atlantic and Central Regional Conferences, NATS Chapters in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Boston, Wisconsin, Orlando, Salt Lake City, Michigan and Miami, and innumerable universities. He is a graduate of Manhattan School of Music.