

## Remembering Frank Baker (1908-2000)

Edward Herbst

In the Fall before Frank passed away, we visited him in North Bennington. Beth Skinner had baked Frank a fresh blueberry tort, which he always loved, and we sat down at the kitchen table with him, as his daughter Betsy moved about, preparing tea. After their cat jumped on the table, and the little mess was cleared up, Beth and I began to talk. Frank's ability to speak was noticeably diminished since his last (ninety first) birthday in 1999, and one had to focus one's attention very intently—even more than usual—to catch his words. So I was filling up a few minutes of time, trying to provide him with pleasant "conversation," talking about my research in Indonesia earlier that year. After a short while, I saw a certain impatience in Frank's eyes that I'd come to recognize behind the beatific smile. He gently waved his hand in the air—kind of like smoke circling round as it rises—a signal for us to listen to him. And then he intoned, "Tell me what you learned from me." I laughed embarrassedly, and asked him how many days he had to listen to my answer. He repeated the request. Then we spent over an hour intently discussing the voice, the process of learning and of singing, with Frank desperately trying to express himself, and indeed managing to engage on a striking level. He was completely alert, eyes gleaming, taking in all we had to say (with hearing aid mostly reliable), and offering questions and answers with the greatest of difficulty. But what an exhilarating experience! The few phrases Frank managed to blurt out were so incisive and heartfelt. With great passion he would try to comment on something one of us said—attempting to get the words out, only having to wave his hand in the air in a

gesture of giving up, with a smile of regret on his face. And still, his presence and engagement—being totally in the moment—were overwhelming, just as with his performances many decades before. One subject we talked about was the effect his stroke had on his teaching. He confirmed once again that he still thought of it as a great blessing.

*When I had left Bennington in 1971 for a year of research in Bali, Frank was in robust health, teaching at the college and in Manhattan. On weekends in 1970 and '71, Beth and I used to hitch a ride down to New York City with Frank, who commuted weekly to teach in his apartment across from the Chelsea Hotel. It wasn't like driving with Henry Brant, whose abhorrence of disembodied sound proscribed the use of radio. Not so with Frank, who would have AM radio's pop music blaring all the way down. We would always sing along with whatever was being played, improvising off the melodies and playing with phonemes, stretching them for their full worth. I still remember his version of "I beg yow-ur pard-e-e-n, I never-r-r purromissed yeeuuw a rowuse gar-r-r-deeen." The ritual element of the drive was always the exact midway stop at a restaurant in the town of Pleasant Valley specializing in home-baked pies, Frank's great delight. By the way, the building later became a real estate company, but within the past year or so has been converted back into the Quail Hollow Restaurant.*

The next year Frank had a massive stroke which paralyzed him and completely took away his ability to talk. A year later, Frank recalled to me how he had laid in his hospital bed while two doctors, thinking he was in a coma, stood over him in conversation. One doctor said something like, "Well, there's no way that he will ever come out of this." The other answered, "You

never know, but he'll never recover, anyway." At that moment, Frank said to himself, "I'm gonna outlive these mother--ers!" And as a matter of fact, he did.

By the time I returned to the States in 1973, Frank was engaged in recuperative activities with his former students. Not only had he lost his ability to speak, but his brain would not allow him to use syntax in ordering the sentences he was struggling to enunciate. He was able to pronounce words, very slowly and slurred, in his gravelly throaty voice we all came to know so well. Frank made it clear to his former students that they must tell him whenever his sentences were confused and jumbled syntactically. Although many of them found it uncomfortable to point out his infirmity, he insisted that they give him that feedback. His students reversed roles and served as instructors. So when he would request of someone, "please milk for me to the store go get," you would have to reply, "Frank, do you know what you just said?" He would laugh when he heard it repeated back to him, and would try again until he got it right. He was reprogramming his brain's circuitry with the help of his former students. But most importantly, and this was the gift of the stroke—he was learning to speak and vocalize from scratch, as a baby might, but with the perspective of an adult—and as an accomplished vocal teacher at that. He was able to experience—and observe simultaneously—the acquisition of speech and song. And this difficult but revelatory process informed his teaching for the rest of his life.

Sometime after Frank's stroke, when Beth and I had returned from our first year in Bali, Indonesia, we went out to dinner at North Bennington's French restaurant, the Rain Barrel, with Frank and Michael Downs. There were

several other tables with people already eating. After placing our orders, Frank said, "The most wonderful thing happened today!" One of us asked, "Great!—what was that, Frank?" "He went on, beaming. "The most wonderful thing! I can oscillate my voice!" "That's fantastic!" we all chimed in. "You want to hear it?," he asked (as if we might say no!). "Yeah." He began a long, gradual "uh" slide from the bottom of his range all the way up and back down, in a strong, and of course, hoarse voice. It was a bellow, but with such a full-bodied beautiful glow to it. We all responded with "wow" and cries of "fantastic." "You want to hear it again?" he asked. With little need for encouragement, he immediately began again with his slow ascent and descent, in perfectly focused intensity and joyful splendor. The French proprietress of the Rain Barrel walked by our table, carrying plates of food to another party, and gave Frank the most pleasant but mannered smile as if to say, "How nice, professor."

Sometime in the early 1970s, Frank was spending quite a bit of time in bed, and one day when I came by to visit, a daytime interview show was on the TV. The host is interviewing Johnny Mathis. "He used to take singing lessons from me. I kept telling him, cut out that vibrato shit," Frank croaks, followed by a hoarse wail of a low vibrato tone imitating Johnny. "Lucky for him he never listened to me."

A couple of years passed, and students, strange as it may seem, were again flocking to his house in North Bennington for voice lessons. Frank could not speak clearly, so it was always at least a bit of an effort to understand him. But he was beginning to shift his always profound vocal teachings into a new gear. He was still unquestionably unable to vocalize as he wished, but his

inability only heightened his sensitivity to the vocalization process. So what he began to do was almost a form of puppetry, or spirit possession—with the student as medium. In a sense it was as if he could inhabit the body of a student and speak or sing through her or him, but in this process the student would learn by feeling and observing the profound experience of vocalizing with Frank. (I guess he anticipated “Being John Malkovich”). There’s a bit of a corollary in Balinese dance and music pedagogy, where the teacher physically guides and molds the student’s body through the movements. In any case, Frank’s students were able to go places they had no way of getting to on their own, by means of this collaborative vocalizing process. There was always an aspect of Frank’s approach to voice wherein he or we would be balancing the kinesthetic experience of resonance—being totally in a state of vibration—with a mental focus which could anticipate where the sound was subsequently heading. He admonished against thinking about what one is doing as one is doing it, but rather concentrating on where one is heading; and the balancing act of mind and body was one of the great challenges of his teachings. (“When you’re driving a car, your eyes are focused on the road, not on the engine.”) But Frank’s ability to embody his consciousness within the mind and vocal apparatus of a student further heightened this extraordinary approach.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Frank’s was a performer, and when his colleague George Finckel asked whether he was interested in joining the faculty at Bennington, Frank said that he had no interest in teaching. But George had a strategy. He invited Frank up to do a concert and voice workshop at the college, and had an instinct that once Frank was amongst the Bennington

students, he would change his mind. And so it was that in 1955 Frank began his life of teaching.

*Beth and I came to visit some time in the early 1980s, and since Frank had just begun teaching a lesson in the living room, we made tea in the kitchen and waited, listening. A student was going through her lines of a play in a resonant, mellifluous voice, and quite expressive. After she was finished, perhaps ten minutes or so, Frank responded, "Great, that was really beautiful." She answered, in a high, squeaky, nasal tone, "Oh, Frank, that was awful, I could never speak like that in a play--it sounds so weird." Beth and I gasped and tried to keep from cracking up, but realized again the profundity of his teaching to differentiate the voice we create early in life for the personality we wish to project to the world—differentiating that from discovering a natural voice, and the myriad possibilities for vocal exploration.*

About this time, several of Frank's students and alumni arranged to attend a Music Department faculty meeting. They wanted to explain that although the College had hired another voice teacher, Frank was currently teaching more private lessons than any of them were—but with no salary. It was really impossible for many of them to believe this, since they would only see Frank at public events—like concerts—when he was particularly incoherent and unintelligible because of the commotion and intrusive noises. But those who visited him at home came to realize that he was functioning in a surprisingly effective way. What was eventually worked out was a half-time position for Frank, one quarter of which was in Music and the other quarter in Theater.

Frank continued to improve, and when the faculty position of voice teacher was open, he applied for the position. As strange as it seems, the still severely vocally-challenged Frank was rehired for the position. How in the world could someone who could hardly speak teach singing? Perhaps this could only have happened at Bennington. The students and faculty understood that what he had to teach was absolutely unique and invaluable. He continued to teach at the college for many more years, until the age of eighty eight. Even at this point retirement was not at all acceptable to Frank, whose entire life was teaching. He did, however, continue to teach anyone who walked in the door of his house, right until the end. I had the great joy of singing and performing in various ways with Frank during his pre-stroke days, and still remember his extraordinary vocal prowess. George Todd, electronic music composer and retired faculty at Middlebury, once described to me his incredible experience of hearing Frank perform back in the 1960s. George recalled that it was as if every cell of Frank's body were vibrating, the resonance was so breathtakingly alive.

This was also my experience of Frank as performer and teacher. After all these years, a day doesn't go by without my thinking of something he said or revealed to me about music. Whenever I'm teaching voice workshops, I find myself quoting him time and time again. And as I sing, I am always aware of the kinesthetic sensations of tone and the state of mindfulness which he instilled in me, by osmosis or spirit mediumship, as he did with so many others during his thirty-five years of teaching at Bennington.

## **Frank anecdotes:**

In the spring of my senior year at New York's High School of Music and Art, I had already put a deposit down for tuition at the new College of Creative Studies at UC Santa Barbara. But I decided to take a bus up to visit Marlboro College for an interview, with nothing much to go on except that Marlboro was known for music. During my interview, I talked about my interest in Harry Partch, electronic music, the arts and religions of Japan and India, Stockhausen, John Cage's recent books *Silence* and *A Year from Monday*. The admissions officer asked if I knew about Bennington College. She said this was the first year they'd be having a male class. She called Bennington right then and there for me, and asked if they were still accepting students (it was already April). There was a pause, and then she added that it was a young man who was interested in applying. After the person at the other end checked, they arranged for me to have an interview later that day. I hitchhiked across Route 9 in the spring rain, and had my interview. The woman who interviewed me then pointed toward a mansion and suggested I look around the music building.

When I walked into the dark wood lobby, no one was there, so I started up the stairs, where I ran into someone looking vaguely like Benjamin Franklin. He greeted me with, "Hello, can I help you?" I told him I was thinking of applying to Bennington. He asked, "What do do play?" When I told him trombone, he said that he had something to show me in his studio that I might find interesting. We went upstairs, and spent the next two hours improvising together on his recently-invented slide clarinets, some variety or other of Schonophones. I was somewhere between the states of disbelief

and rapture. Finally, the teacher (Gunnar Schonbeck) told me he had an appointment to get to, but that I should look in at the voice workshop just beginning next door in the Carriage Barn. Gunnar walked me over and introduced me to the singing teacher. As I sat down, this teacher was explaining to the students that everyone was to stand up, close their eyes, and vocalize any sound that came into their minds, responding to others with voices and movement. I decided to be polite and close my eyes as well, while I sat quietly. After some silence, people began somewhat timidly, with discrete calls and answers, some sustained tones and chirps. All of a sudden I heard a roar, a thundering blast, scat-singing and screams filling the room, accompanied by wild stamping feet. I couldn't help opening my eyes to discover who was roaring and dancing wildly around the barn. It was the teacher. It was then that I had a feeling that this must be the place for me, and soon thereafter lost my deposit at UCSB.

**Two other commuting stories do not involve Frank but are vignettes he relished:**

One involves his good friend and colleague, Pulitzer-prize winning composer Henry Brant. One winter we got a ride down to the city with Henry in his VW Bug. It turned into a terrific snowstorm as we hit the Taconic, and we discovered that Henry's defroster wasn't working (and apparently hadn't been working for some time). We drove the whole way down with Henry having to peer through the windshield at the one tiny clear spot at the very bottom of the windshield wiper's reach (it kept freezing in place). We would stop every ten minutes or so so I could get out and scrape the windshield, but it would ice up again immediately. Beth and I had zero visibility and felt

utterly, nightmarishly trapped in that cold Bug, creeping down the parkway. Henry was squunching his body up the whole way down the Taconic so that he could see through that little window of visibility. Anyway, as I remember, it took us about ten hours to get into Manhattan, and poor Henry could hardly stand up straight when we finally got out at Broadway and 96th Street.

Another weekend, we got a ride with a fellow student in her VW Bug. As we left Manhattan to return to Vermont, she casually commented that the brakes weren't working. Every once in a while she would mention again that she'd really have to take the Bug in to have the brakes looked at. As we got close to Bennington, she asked if we would mind if she took the car directly over to the VW dealership, because she didn't think it was safe to drive around town. So after a four-hour drive, we got to the VW place and pulled into the parking lot. She drove right up to their main display window and the car slowed down. As she floored the brakes, the Bug kept seeming to come to a stop, but it kept inching closer to the huge glass window. As we looked on in horror, the Bug crawled inch by inch, and crashed right through the glass before coming to a stop. Our friend got out, walked up to the nearest VW showroom employee, and said, "I need to get my brakes repaired."

And I assume many of you have heard the Marlene Deitrich story by now, but here goes, anyway. Back in the 1950s, Frank was hosting a party in his Manhattan apartment, and was somewhat inebriated when the phone rang. He answered, and a woman at the other end asked for Mr. Baker. He affirmed his identity, and she told him that she was interested in taking singing lessons. He suggested they schedule a lesson for the following week

and she picked Monday. When he asked her name she replied "Marlene Deitrich." Out of his well-lubricated throat came, "Don't give me that shit! What kind of —ing joke is this?" When she insisted that it was indeed who she was, he decided to play along. "Okay, what time should we meet, and your place or mine?" She suggested that it would probably be more convenient and discrete to meet at her apartment and gave Frank the address. He thought this was a prank but curiosity gave way.

On Monday he showed up at the fancy digs the caller had indicated, and to his surprise, the doorman led him to the elevator as soon as he mentioned that Marlene Deitrich was expecting him. Riding up in the elevator he started to get nervous. When he knocked and Marlene Deitrich greeted him at the door, he began to shake uncontrollably. She led him into the living room and asked him to sit down, but as Frank dizzily headed for the couch, he tripped over a coffee table and fell on the floor.

Once he had recovered himself, Frank and Ms. Deitrich did manage to have a nice conversation over tea. He asked her why, after so many years of singing, she wanted to take voice lessons. She told him she was planning to launch a concert tour and that her daughter and manager had thought it would be best if she had some coaching. Frank insisted that her voice was unique, and so strongly identified with her film personality; and since she had done so well up until then, he thought she should go ahead and sing without a teacher changing anything. Ms. Deitrich confided with Frank that these were indeed her feelings as well, and she did go on to concertize soon after.