

SINGING: Personal and performance values in Training

Peter T Harrison

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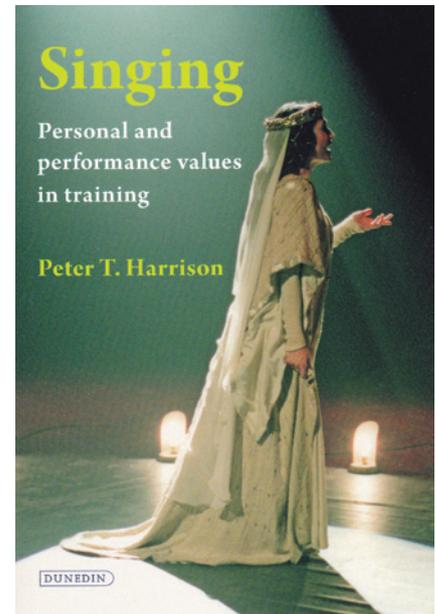
Reviewed by Dr Cate Madill

Singing is the most passionate form of conscious verbalised communication in the human species. It is therefore appropriate that a book on the singing voice be filled with passion – and this book is. *Singing: Personal and performance values in Training* is not for the faint hearted or those looking for a middle road. It is not a follow-by-numbers instruction book or a scientifically based explanation of the singing voice. It is a bold and decisive statement in which Peter Harrison puts pen to a deeply personal manifesto – an unashamed call to arms of what he feels should be occurring in the psyche, the mind, the heart and the life of every singing pedagogue. In every page there is a heartfelt claim about the singing voice; the condition and needs of the singer; the vulnerability of the developing singer; the appetites of the listening public that shape the singing landscape; the common science that informs and can mislead; the singing teachers and institutions; or, the meaning of what it is to sing. Myths are challenged, sacred cows threatened, and the gauntlet thrown down to many deeply held beliefs.

The book is divided into four parts. Part 1, *The Singing Voice*, includes consideration of a holistic view of the voice, the body and the self. In the section on *Physical Structure*, anatomical and physiological aspects of the mechanism are lyrically described;

unfortunately, these descriptions are reliant on older anatomical references and personal interpretations of scientific findings, which compromise the authority so firmly stamped throughout the text. His proposed translation of singing style to psychological function will be questioned by many; however, the section on false perspectives and misperceptions will resonate with many readers. Part 2, *The Work*, and Part 3, *Conditions*, are much clearer recommendations for singing teachers working in singing schools or working with singers in more traditional training contexts. In Part 4, *The Enshrining of Values*, Harrison focuses on the challenges and difficult questions with which singing pedagogues must wrestle. This section of the book, more than any other, calls us forth and demands accountability, integrity and deep self-reflection – the preparedness to take account of deeply held beliefs and allow some current knowledge to shine an intense and piercing light upon what we think we know. This is to be applauded and such courage revered. Harrison sets a high bar for the profession of singing pedagogues – to rightly honour the magnificence and complexity of what it is to sing. Such a worthy, yet Herculean, task will inspire and enthuse many readers.

Harrison's journey to achieve this vision is not without its pitfalls and distractions. His unfortunate lack of reference to what is a large, and in many cases compelling, body of recent scientific evidence in the areas of voice science, motor learning, psychology and systems theory, to support his ideas is disappointing and leaves a sense of opportunity lost. For example, the clarion call to train the singer to really hear and listen to the sound and the message, rather than focus on technique, is well supported



by the recent insights in motor learning in voice training. He confesses his ambivalence to scientific knowledge and investigation early in the book; however, scientists have been the sentinels of objectivity in this very passionate world, and are worthy of more than the lip service afforded in this edition.

That being said, this book is well overdue in the singing literature as it places the need of the singer, or singing student, at the centre. It challenges singing pedagogues to take moral inventory of their motives, the ethics of their behaviour, their attachments to schools of teaching, their knowledge of the vocal system, the place and use of science in an artistic expression that is fundamentally individual and unique. Harrison acknowledges that the reason we sing is to communicate the heightened emotion and passion that only the sung message can convey. Whether you agree with him or not – if you read, and reflect upon, his words you'll be a better singing teacher for it.