

Excerpts

Singing

Personal and Performance Values in Training

PART I – The Singing Voice

To appreciate the true nature and possibilities of the singing voice I believe we need to distance ourselves from styles and stereotypes... and take a fresh look at the 'basics'.

It is generally recognised that healthy vocalisation demands a strong, flexible breathing system, but what tends to be overlooked is that muscular events that happen in the throat... influence how the breathing system itself operates.

We hear so much false or forced emotion in singing – not only in the pop and music theatre world where, for lack of the relevant physical-physiological freedoms, it is *necessary* to simulate emotion, but also in classical singing, especially so-called 'operatic' singing – that it is no wonder many people try to avoid the very spark that fires the singer's voice into life.

All skills attributable to the singing voice are inherent to it. What's more, they potentialise one another... a voice is not free until all its skills come together naturally. This means that however much we may desire them, skills and qualities cannot realistically be aims in themselves.

A natural or healthy voice is operationally... all-of-a-piece from top to bottom... It is not thought out or technically produced, but is part and parcel of the singer's physiological make-up, like seeing, hearing, walking and breathing.

The personal nature of our singing voice – the human heart of it... may turn out to be its most significant aspect. ...In learning to sing it often seems to be side-tracked or suppressed in favour of something more imitative or 'cosmetic'.

The most conscientious attempts at tapping into a singer's true vocal personality are rarely without difficulties. The process seems by implication to question our way of being, and threatens it.

When you and your activity are one, your performance and what you say are grounded in authenticity. This is the power of presence. Power is innate and is manifest in a singer's ability to choose.

It is not what a singer demonstrates but what they convey to their audience and inspire in them that makes them a good singer.

False perspectives and misconceptions

One of the effects of learning to speak is that our voice is confined, most of the time, to a small range of its capacity. This gives the impression that anything outside this range is somehow not normal – including 'classical' singing.

A fully integrated voice *feels* integrated, not something 'apart'. It does not need holding onto, or holding up, or pushing along. It moves and travels *with* you, not because you make it do so but because it *is* you.

If unnatural ways and means are devised in order to... satisfy musical criteria, the singer has to concentrate on those ways and means. ...The objectives have been impeded by a preoccupation with how to produce them.

If an aspiring singer-musician wants to avoid struggling with conflicting performance interests, they must undergo a purposeful, integrating process of training and learning in which every facet and component makes sense of every other facet and component.

PART II – The Work

In my experience few would-be singers have the remotest idea about what the profession entails, and a worrying number of them seem none the wiser for their conservatory or college education.

Any programme of work...

...must be foundational, individual and with a view to the long term. It must be a process that always, and in all respects, feeds the individual singer's growth.

A literary department should be a beehive of practical study.

Students rarely know-how to benefit from their practice. It is often thought that the more you do the better you will get. But the more of what? And what does better mean?

In as much as it means getting up in front of people and... sharing with them something special that you have, performing is another facet of the singer's art that needs to be practiced from the start.

PART III – Conditions

Singers should resist the temptation , or perceived necessity, to adjust to the acoustic of a space, however dry or bright. For many this is a hard lesson, but the reasons behind it are logical and its implications are far-reaching.

An inspiring working environment designed for efficiency and enjoyment, a spirit of community and mutual support, and an attitude of care, all add up to conditions that nurture.

An enabling situation is an accepting one, offering the student freedom and encouragement to move out of their comfort zone.

Techniques and methods usually have some anatomical tag, or bear the name of their inventor. Since they are imposed from the outside, or learned by mindless rote, little or no participation is required...

...Instead of self-reliance and the freedom and authority to be truly creative, the pupil becomes (or remains) dependent on technique and praise.

The holistic paradigm raises our level of consciousness by making a quantum jump away from constraining thoughts and habits into a broader field of vision and possible action.

Recognising the singing voice as 'organ-ised' should ensure that our unlocking and developing approach is in accord with its organic nature. The fact that there is no 'it' prevents us labouring to impose our will on it.

Personal involvement in an organisation...can instil a feeling both of belonging and of ownership.

PART IV – The Enshrining of Values

Descriptions of singing, however vivid or detailed, have little if anything to do with its experience...
...As trainers, tutors and organisers...we do well to distinguish between learning *about* singing, *about* voice or *about* vocal music, and learning to sing.

If, from the perspective of advanced training, a prospective student singer's potential is perceived in sufficient measure, the subsequent training will be one of releasing, developing and honing what effectively is already there. No amount of theorising or acumen can take the place of this all-involving experiential process.

The issue...begins with asking what those concerned with a singer's education...are actually dealing with. The answer is two-fold: the singer as a person, and the singer's performance. How the singer *is* affects their performance – how authentic it is, how deep it goes and so on.

Schools of singing do not have to live up to standards so much as create them.

Finding our voice – metaphorically – is something we all need to do in order to express the meaning of our life. In literally finding our singing voice we tap into something that is able to express the depths of our humanity; this is why singing is so universally compelling.

There is sufficient evidence in our field to show that competition is meaningless. First, singers are unique in what they have to offer artistically. If only this fact were recognised and acted upon, performances of singing might be more interesting and exciting.

In learning to sing, and in the activity of singing, people connect through inner realisations, values, behaviours and motivations. These shared patterns of behaviour are an essential requirement for the generation of meaning and well-being.

Co-operation, born of mutual respect and the joy of creating, can bring home to individuals not only the *worth* of their work but their own intrinsic value... The emphasis can shift from 'Who is best?' to 'What is the best we can give?'

Excellence is not something optional or something stuck on the top of training, like cherries on a cake, but the continuation of the deepening and refining processes that have been underway for years – *singing built and refined on sure foundations*.

Excellence in our field is a question not of accurate reproduction or any kind of glitter, but of appropriate response to the singer's material.

...imagination is fertile because it searches, reaches out in all directions, and is free to roam. Technique, dogma and rigid rules all dim imagination's light or dampen its delight in adventure.

Excellence may be the fruit of desire, but desire on its own is not enough. It is the person who *cares* who gets to see real quality and work with it.

I do not believe that formal modes of examination are fair. They almost always judge results on spurious or subjective criteria...

Our best, most knowledgeable critic, in art as in life, is ourself.

It is a matter of moral as well as artistic concern how the employment of technique refutes the claim to freedom...

I have observed colleagues grasping with one hand at uncoordinated bits of information, and with the other at surviving pieces of past practice. Neither together nor separately do these straws add up to a reliable basis for sound practice.

Students need a teacher they can trust. Consensus among singing teachers at the top schools is urgently needed to give teaching at this level legitimacy.

In what ways and to what extent are established schools open to possibilities? To what extent are they held back by Quality Assurance....

Sacrificing vocal and personal authenticity in an attempt to be stylistically authentic, nothing of excellence is gained.

As the singer's capacity for wholeness is realised the quality of their performance grows exponentially.

One can no more put a price on singing than... on the person doing it. This is why the market, which values anything that sells, can be so misleading...