

Excerpts

The Human Nature of the Singing Voice

Exploring a Holistic Basis for Sound Teaching and Learning

Hearing versus physical sensation

In spite of the importance of our hearing, and the fact that singing is essentially sound, the idea that to be in control of one's voice one must actually hear it, is perhaps the least understood aspect of singing. Singers are generally asked: 'What does it feel like when you sing?' rather than 'What does it sound like?' They are asked what they do when they sing and a physical description is expected.

A singer does have a physical sense of what he's doing, just as a builder or a dancer does. However, both teachers of singing and singers might profitably ask:

1. Of what benefit is the physical sensation to the singer?
2. Is this sensation indicative of good practice?
3. Do all singers feel their singing in the same way?
4. Can physical sensations be depended upon?

However strongly felt, physical sensations are invariably subjective. How do singers know that what they are feeling is what their teacher wants them to feel? How does the teacher know that what the singer is feeling when she sings is the same as he feels in his demonstration? Looking for specific sensations when singing is certainly a popular pursuit, but it is also the subject of much disagreement.

Vocal divisiveness

The voice with which we were all born, which has the capacity to unite us through the expression of universally shared emotions as well as the shaping and sounding of words (which are in turn responsible for the flowering of a shared intelligence) in a sense separates whole groups of our human race and even individuals within the same group from each other. Furthermore, for all its importance, the acquisition of language speaking will be seen to divide us from ourselves.

Voice and communication

The voice that carries without effort attracts. We were all born with this voice, and can therefore assume that it was intended by nature. Indeed, we might reasonably deduce that this easily-delivered, attracting voice was part of an efficient communications plan. Nowadays, communication over any distance usually requires technical assistance if it is not to sound harsh or strained. This further distances the speaker from the listener. Someone who speaks with a clearly projected voice, and is thereby always audible is often considered impolite or embarrassing. For want of practice or encouragement our original voice loses its ease and power of projection, setting up a potential barrier to communication.

Voice and emotion

We have various means of expressing our emotional life, some active (such as caressing a loved one, or banging a fist on the table) and others passive (facial expressions and other involuntary tensions). When it comes to the voice, we might sigh or shout, or else put our feelings into words, a 'mental framework'. However, it seems to be a mark of our modern civilisation not to express how we feel

(or even what we think) in a clear, direct manner. Instead, we must be cautious, polite, and politically correct. What we say in fact often belies what we're feeling. We prefer to say what we think, or what we want others to hear us say rather than expressing our true, raw feelings, or else we 'explain them away'. This is exacerbated by an inability to express our emotions vocally. For various reasons some of the physical mechanisms involved have become inhibited, or dysfunctional. Tone of voice is usually confined to the vocal limitations of speech, lacking focus, range and colour. These limits are only overcome when emotion is allowed to well up, or is shocked into coming from a deeper or higher place than usual. Then, the connections between the source of feeling and the source of sound make a more complete, effective partnership...

This is enormously significant for singing, not only in the sense of enabling a singer to be faithful to prescribed sentiments, but in the extent to which his voice is emotionally sensitive and spontaneously creative, making the crucial difference in performance between something soundly reproduced (judged to be 'good' for various specific reasons), and something which places vocal communication on an altogether deeper level...

Breathing

It is commonly assumed that there's a special way to breathe for singing, which entails increasing the capacity of our lungs. This might seem logical, particularly if (as is normally the case, especially with inexperienced singers) we don't feel as though we have sufficient breath to sustain a phrase of music, or to sing loudly. However, if we examine the breathing system as a whole, we can begin to understand that this is a fallacy which has led to much abuse (...) Popular jargon phrases such as 'the column of air' and 'sub-glottic pressure' are not user-friendly. When you consider the smallness (both in length and bulk) of the average vocal fold system, compared with the rest of the musculature involved, you can see that it would take little effort to put the folds under undue pressure, or even 'brutalise' them. The struggling that often seems to be encouraged (if unwittingly) in singing, suggests that the relationship between breathing and these short lengths of muscles is not well understood.

The transforming voice

The power of singing lies largely in its transforming qualities: the ability to move the other, the fellow human, into being, into feelings that otherwise might remain hidden. Singing can help others (especially those who cannot sing) to experience their song through a kind of empathy. Singing can help people to break out of their emotional constraints and feel truly themselves. Those who are fortunate enough to find their voices therefore have a responsibility to those who are not.

Making connections

We could see the singing voice as reflecting a critical meeting of opposite, mutually dependent and balancing human qualities: on the one hand physical strength and, on the other, attributes of the developed intellect such as artistic and musical sensitivity. In singing the one without the other is found seriously wanting. For best results we must rebalance our human sophistication with our primitive nature. In training this can be linked to specific, highly differentiated muscle work (some meticulous, some relatively crude) in the process of re-integrating aspects of the voice which, because of quite contrasting characteristics, may appear on the surface to be unrelated.

Teaching and technique

The teaching of singing is an individual matter. While each teacher must find ways and means which suit his or her personality, these must be sufficiently flexible and adaptable to cater for every individual singer with his or her changing needs. A pre-formulated technique is by definition a denial of individuality. Teachers should be appropriately inventive and experimental in their approach to their work.

It is easy to fault a voice, or even to imagine it fully developed, but the solution is rarely if ever a matter of replacing bad practice with good, which is more likely to lead to further conditioning. While most techniques are designed to gain a preconceived product by some prescribed means, a viable process is a constant advancement by unwritten means towards the freedom and completeness of a voice with its own unique dimensions and qualities.

Learning and progress

Learning to sing is an exciting and invigorating adventure. It can also be frustrating and frightening, because it's a journey into the unknown. No one knows how long it will take, how easy or difficult it will be, what or who you might meet on the way, or the eventual outcome. Your teacher is your guide, no more, no less. He or she has knowledge of the singing voice, and has made many similar journeys. Your journey, however, is a new one for him or her. And like mountaineering, this is going to depend on team work. A teacher can't do anything without the pupil's co-operation.

Progress always implies change. Releasing and developing a voice doesn't mean exchanging one way of singing for another but realising potential.

Fitness and exercising

Our ever-increasing dependency on mechanical aids for comfort and efficiency has meant that for a long time we have made less and less physical effort in everyday life. Benefits of increased comfort and economy of effort are largely an illusion, since inactivity brings on ill-health. Loss of muscle tone makes for poor performance in the simplest of physical activities, and adversely affects the quality of our life, our sense of well-being and sheer aliveness. When it comes to something requiring unusual strength (such as climbing a steep hill or lifting a box of books) we often unwittingly force the issue because of diminished strength in one area or another. If, in singing, the various muscle zones are not well-coordinated and balanced in strength, strain is inevitably put on the breathing system, the spine, the thorax, the throat or the larynx itself, depending on the nature and severity of the imbalance. A reckless combination of imbalance and enthusiasm is evident in the way many singers approach their training or practice, with mindless and often forceful repetition of exercises that have little or no physiological basis or purpose.

The singing voice

We talk about 'the singing voice' to distinguish it from 'the speaking voice'. While we could define the singing voice as 'that with which we vocalise music with words' there are numerous combinations of words with music and many ways of vocalising. Even in the classical field, singing can mean many different things. We might deduce from this that the world is taking full advantage of the singing voice, and we only have to pick or invent our style. This is a dangerous illusion, based on the fact that the voice we were born with (by my definition 'the singing voice') is extremely versatile. (...) I consider the voice trainer's task not so much teaching people to sing in a way that manifests certain skills as regenerating an instrument that has suffered neglect and abuse, the implication being that once restored to its natural shape it can do the job for which it was designed.

The balanced voice and performance

One of the reasons that singing is such a formidably demanding profession is that you have to be many things at once: flexible vocalist, knowledgeable musician, lover of language (and able to sing in several different languages), actor, communicator, and creative artist. You have to be all these in public and to command! Each skill must be well honed and polished, and, if they're not each going to suffer to some extent, they must be treated as equally important. This book has deliberately concentrated on the singing voice, because it is basic and facilitates the physical expression of everything else. In the sense that singing is a holistic activity, however, all facets must work for the good of each other. This complementariness makes for the most confident and telling performance.

Bel canto?

Whatever we think of the music associated with bel canto, we cannot avoid seeing at a glance that it was not simply a style to be sung in a certain manner. (...) Since the late 19th century, singers have had to cope with more and more non-lyrical music, unsympathetic orchestrations, works written by composers who have not considered the nature of the singing voice, and larger and more powerful orchestras. The effect has been disastrous for singing! Singers are no longer encouraged to sing with integrated vocal and expressive skills, the thing that best defines bel canto. What is the use of being able to sing 'big' without flexibility, or accurately without emotion? Who wants to sing ugly?

The unique voice

The singing voice is like a multi-faceted diamond which, if it is well-cut and polished, reflects your true nature and worth in sound. This is why training and care of the voice must include attention to and care of our inner life. In training we 'sound' our inner self, giving ourselves feedback in the process of becoming discerning listeners. This is a mutually reinforcing process, which so long as it is pursued with an open mind and heart leads inexorably towards wholeness and health. This diamond inside, in all its clarity of colours and character, is priceless, not because it is unusual but because it is unique to each of us.