

How Mind Governs Voice

PART 2: A BASIC APPROACH IN THE TEACHING OF SINGING

Victor A. Fields



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Lynn Maxfield

Associate Editor's comments: "If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants." The old maxim reminds us all that, regardless of our position in the work to sow pedagogic success, our harvests are due in part to the work of those who plowed the fields before us. This unique issue of the *Journal of Singing* is sure to contain ample opportunities for us to reflect on our shared history as teachers of singing. Such was certainly the case for me as I read the following 1972 contribution by Victor A. Fields.

While I had never seen Mr. Fields's article prior to preparing this issue, the further I read, the clearer it became that my thinking has been shaped by a lineage of voice teachers who had. In his article, Fields adjusts an ancient philosophic maxim to state, "As a man thinketh so does he speak, and therefore sing." Permit me to extend it further and claim, "As your teacher teacheth, so do you teach." Enjoy learning from the teachings of 75 years of NATS history!

— LYNN MAXFIELD

THIS THREE-PART SERIES continues the viewpoint that vocal pedagogy is both art and science and that there are both obvious and hidden factors in the process of a singer's development. The obvious approach is based on observable technical disciplines. But certain principles and practices transcend the outward manifestations of vocal and physical behavior. They are hidden but need to be considered. Indeed, a teacher's responsibilities encompass both psychological and physiological aspects of the student's development and therefore demand both artistic and scientific implementation.

The Specific Aims of Vocal Teaching. In broad terms, the teaching of singing may be described as a process of administering systematic instruction and exercise for the purpose of developing the mental and physical abilities that enter into the artistic performance of vocal expression in song. Such a program must develop competence to think, act, interpret and express musically. It must also cultivate a knowledge of the right musical and cultural resources that are available to the vocalist, and it must train him for versatility and flexibility of expression that will readily adapt itself to an abundant and varied vocal repertoire.

However, to be able to achieve these aims, a teacher of singing must prepare himself with a knowledge of the philosophy and psychology of the learning process, he must clarify his understanding of the physiology of the vocal tract, he must acquire skill in the diagnosis and correction of vocal faults and in the building of good habits of tone production, and he must perfect his ability to demonstrate, analyze or explain, by precept and analogy, any of the innumerable problems of performance that might arise in administering the vocal training program.

He must also remember that successful teaching procedures are practical applications of the laws of learning. They are geared to demonstrable outcomes, not by a process of wishful thinking or aimless experimentation but by a predetermined practice procedure in pursuit of predetermined goals. Much theoretical, technical and scientific background is therefore needed to equip the teacher with factual knowledge, underlying principles and philosophies and a frame of reference for the many forms of instruction that are used in cultivating the singer's art.

In other words, although we say that singing is an art, scientific knowledge and skill are necessarily built into the preparation for teaching. The demarcation is not always clear, since both art and science are simultaneously involved in voice training. A teacher of singing, therefore, becomes an instrument for interblending the two as they apply to the pupil's needs.

A primary objective is to develop the mental faculties that control singing. This aspect of teaching is usually taken for granted but it deserves special attention, since it concerns itself with four basic psychological factors that enter into the cultivation of the artist singer's voice: FIRST, that mental imagery governs voice control; SECOND, that the singer's art is a product of habit formation; THIRD, that self-expression is a basic human instinct; and FOURTH, that singing is essentially an expression of enthusiasm or joy in life. A nontechnical discussion of these four elements is here given to broaden the teacher's understanding.

Mental Imagery a Governing Factor. In a general sense, MIND is defined as the instrument of creative intelligence in man that enables him to absorb, assimilate and express the characteristics of life within and around him. In singing, however, the activity of mind is largely

ideational and conceptual. That is to say, vocal utterance is governed by the ideas or concepts that fill the singer's mind both before and during his performance.

A concept is the mental image we form of an action or thing and it is unlikely that we could ever perform an act of intelligible utterance without having formed such an image. Conception is therefore the power or process of forming ideas, a necessary antecedent to any act of expression. The effectiveness of all oral communication may be said to lie largely in the clarity, coherence and completeness of the mental image which precedes or accompanies it.

Thus, mental imagery provides the very plan and purpose of vocal expression. The formation of the sounds of the voice and their adequate projection are direct outpicturings of these underlying concepts, and vocal expression is therefore said to be governed by the singer's powers of visualization and mental imagery.

Because singing combines mental, emotional and physical experience in a peculiar way, we may assume that it more directly engages the mental functions than is true of performance on any artificial musical instrument. Our deepest impulses find utterance in voice. A cry of anguish or of physical pain, warning of danger, anger, joyous laughter—these are manifestations of intense feelings that find outlet in spontaneous vocal expression. In each case the output is the direct result of a strong mental or emotional stimulus. The thought engenders the action.

In other words, it is not merely a certain muscular activity that produces vocal tone. Rather, it is the mental concept or image of the tone, and the impulse to communicate it, that governs and produces the muscular activity concerned therewith. This is not only true in the control of musical pitch, but it also applies in all other aspects of the singer's performance.

As a man thinketh so is he. This ancient maxim may very well be amplified to read: As a man thinketh so does he speak and, therefore, sing. Basically, it is the MIND that sings, not the voice. You can say or sing only what you can think. Therefore, you sing only as beautiful a tone as you can think, since your voice always follows your thought.

Whether we are conscious of it or not, vocal expression is governed by this law. Hence we must learn to sing in thought, for the tone is embedded in the idea

that produces it. Thinking motivates pitch, intensity, expressional nuance and other technical factors of voice production. Lofty ideas beget expansive tones. Angry thoughts produce harsh tones. Introspective thoughts tend to inhibit, subdue or constrict the voice. In other words, man is largely a product of his ideas, his way of thinking; and mental imagery, be it lofty or debased, is a governing influence in creating overt behavior and, therefore, vocal behavior.

We must teach the mind first, then the muscles, for understanding precedes the operation or functioning of the vocal mechanism. To reverse this process is to train vocal muscles by the mere repetition of meaningless actions. This is slavish imitation of memorized patterns, devoid of initiative, creativity or motivation. It is mechanistic behavior.

The use of rote-learning procedures builds expressionless precision into the vocal function. Intelligence is a prime factor here. What the singer does with intelligence will have meaning, purpose, esthetic and emotional appeal. What he does in mechanical imitation will sound stilted, devoid of feeling and meaningless. In other words, the voice that is habitualized through mechanistic training is, at best, a synthetic unconvincing product. It may produce sonorous and melodious tones, but it will not convey intelligible and convincing messages. The teacher's first guiding principle, therefore, is that **MENTAL IMAGERY GOVERNS VOCAL CONTROL**.

Let us examine this further. In an acoustical sense, the larynx is the source of tonal energy in that it generates the vibratory disturbance in the atmosphere that we call voice. But how this occurs is also the responsibility of mind and ear, for the process of tone production is part of an auditory complex that is initiated by the will to make a sound. When motivated by a desire to speak or sing, this action of the vocal cords becomes a channel of expression and the product thereof acquires meaning and feeling values.

The muscular responses that produce voice are therefore the effects rather than the causes of expression. We may say that voice without intelligent mental direction is as meaningless as any action would be without motivation. Such behavior is aimless, mechanical, expressionless. The laryngeal and respiratory mechanisms of tone production, therefore, are directly controlled by this desire to express and, likewise, every vocal

nuance in singing is basically governed by some such impulse or desire.

With this in view, we must approach the teaching of singing with an understanding of motives underlying the vocal impulse. We will discover optimal vocal conditions only when earnestness and sincerity of thought and feeling find a direct route to the organs of communication. Ideally, these organs are to be in no way blocked or frustrated by external physical hindrances or internal emotional restraints. In other words, when freedom of expression is desired, limitations must be removed.

This point of view is important here. Man is not a body containing a mind. He is a mind expressing through a body. Voice is not merely a mechanism of the body producing a tone. It is the tonal image projecting itself through physical channels into audibility. Understanding the basic difference between these two concepts is paramount in vocal teaching. The former is mechanistic, the latter artistic or creative. Therefore, if the tonal image is properly motivated, expression will be full of meaning and purpose.

What does this mean to the singing teacher? Simply, that a pupil must be instructed to think, imagine or visualize each tone, each word, phrase or idea clearly as he sings it. Concentration and single-mindedness are called for. As the mental picture clarifies itself through the mind's power of visualization, the physical organism will attune itself in every way to the purpose of communicating it accurately. This physiological response moves muscles, bones and cartilages with speed, efficiency and fluency in a coordinated effort that fulfills both image and impulse and a tonal message results. The teacher of singing must realize this and convey this idea, by whatever means, to the pupil.

Enthusiasm, sincerity of purpose and a clear, clean mental image must originate every vocal effort. By using imagination, the pupil creates a perfect mental picture. He steadily holds this new creation as a model or ideal while subconscious energies work it into audible expression. This psychological process directs all forms of physical behavior, including the singing voice. Cultivating mental imagery may seem slow, at first, but it is an infallible guide to vocal mastery.

In terms of pupil instruction, then, the foregoing discussion may be translated into seven steps of mental discipline.

1. Create a tonal image or tonal pattern.
2. Visualize it in detail.
3. Discuss it and understand it.
4. Study a living model.
5. See yourself in the finished role.
6. Prepare a plan of study and action.
7. Remove all obstacles by systemic practice.

Needless to say, for optimal results, when vocal lessons once begin they should be continued without interruption until mastery is achieved. The results of this procedure will bring about the formation of a strong and unwavering mental image worthy of attainment, an ideal that is nourished by constant reflection and meditation until it finds adequate and fearless expression in life.

Is tonal imagery all that is required to make a singer? No. But the human body, the entire nervous system, is so constructed that it becomes attuned to correct action when guided and directed from within by such ideal preconceptions. Thus, through persistent mental imagery correct vocal habits will be initiated and bad habits will be reeducated.

It may be difficult for older pupils to accept this explanation, at first. After a long period of struggling with the consciously controlled muscular responses of the vocal tract it is sometimes difficult to accept the supervisory control of the mind or to surrender oneself completely to it. Many pupils have been conditioned by years of trial-and-error teaching in which physical effort was ever uppermost. Thus, they have been placing the cart before the horse and, by reverse thinking, have frustrated the expressional impulses used for artistic singing. All this must now be changed and the changeover is not always easy. The pupil must now be taught to keep the mind steadily focused on what is tonally desired, that is, on the tonal ideal. He returns to this image again and again, patiently but persistently concentrating on it.

Concentration is the state of mind that focuses and sustains the attention on one point or common center to the exclusion of all other thoughts and conditions. Concentration is always improved by motivation or interest. Steadfastness of thought and a single, not double, attention focus is to be maintained until the whole personality submits to this sustained, centralized idea. Vocal organs, breathing organs, blood stream, digestion, heart beat, the entire physical frame, will likewise tune in

with the thought and bring forth its optimal expression, lending every nerve, muscle and fibre to the effort. By concentration and tonal imagery, energy is directed into prepared and receptive vocal channels with the utmost efficiency and economy of effort.

Nothing but misdirected thought can obstruct this reaction. When the tonal image is blurred, confused, or indeterminate, vocal expression itself will be weak, strained and faulty, enfeebled by loss or lack of mental energy. The nervous system, directed by thought, supplies the energy for every muscular response in the body. Hence, the pupil must learn that, in any vocal performance, it is really the mind that sings, not the muscle. And he must learn to keep it that way. We reiterate our first principle, therefore, that **MENTAL IMAGERY GOVERNS VOCAL CONTROL**.

The Role of Habit. The second guiding principle is that the singer's voice is a product of habit formation. Through habit the body becomes an obedient servant of the mind. Training makes this possible. It is a remarkable phenomenon of learning that newly studied conscious techniques can be made to function as *involuntary* actions if we repeat them often enough. How long this conditioning process takes depends upon the industry and intelligence of the individual and the complexity of the desired performance. In every case, the ultimate result in habit formation is an effortless and automatic outcome. When a learned activity is unconsciously but correctly performed, it has become an acceptable habit, but not until then.

Habits are reflex-like responses conditioned into the nervous system through intelligent training. They are patterns of behavior that become easy through practice until they can be performed without hesitancy, conscious thought or concentration. Habits can be either mental or muscular, or both, affecting either our manner of associating ideas or our manner of performing physical skills. In any case they are an acquired predisposition to respond always in the same way to given stimuli.

Habit buys us freedom from conscious control; and yet, learned habits are usually built through conscious discipline and conscious control. This apparent paradox applies in all kinds of technical training. A ballet dancer attains freedom and grace of movement through a regimen of rigidly applied bodily disciplines that regulate every aspect of physical behavior. A child learns the

freedom of walking only by first learning to control the movements and coordination of his limbs. A typist at first consciously masters certain prescribed finger movements and is later able to translate thoughts into printed words with great freedom and fluency. The pilot learns to fly an airplane by repeatedly and endlessly practicing the manipulation of a complex but exact regulatory mechanism.

Complicated controls likewise enter into learning how to speak a language freely, how to be an actor, how to sing. It is the paradox of all artistic training, indeed of all education, that before you can *free* yourself you must first learn to *control* yourself. In other words, self-control brings freedom of action only when correct habits have been formed.

But the habit training procedure involves certain hazards. Our zealous devotion to a fixed practice routine can lead to a one-sided technical development that is mechanically perfect but artistically barren. The teacher of singing is caught between these two objectives—consciously controlled technique on the one hand and released expression on the other. An effective teacher must learn to reconcile these apparent opposites so that the end product will be a balanced artist rather than a sterile technician.

To a certain extent we are all products of habit formation. Our natural behavior is largely due to the habits we have acquired. The so-called *natural* voice is also a product of habit formation. *Natural*, in this sense, means *habitual*. Any action, however complex or awkward it may seem, can become second nature through persistent repetition, or until habit takes over. Then we say it seems “natural.”

We aim at naturalness in all our singing. But it is the *illusion* of naturalness that we are seeking, for anything can be made to feel natural if it has been trained until it becomes a habit. A truly artistic performer always gives this impression of naturalness or complete ease of execution. Effortless mastery is, indeed, the prime object of all voice training. To be natural in singing is to abandon yourself to your habits, provided, of course, the habits are good ones.

What can be done when previously established bad habits intervene? They may be reeducated through corrective exercises. Thus, we isolate the bad habit problem for separate treatment. But this type of remedial drill is,

at best, a part-learning procedure which will eventually contribute to, but not supplant, the whole act of expression. In other words, when the problem is solved, when the bad habit is reeducated and the correct action habitualized, the newly corrected drill pattern must merge with the total responses of the singing act at the proficiency level of the completed performance.

The techniques of singing may therefore be a product of repetitive drill and exercise. But they are not a finished product until, through habit formation, they become effortless and serve as channels through which vocal behavior is released in response to the communicative urge from within. Conversely, it may be said that any self-conscious vocal performance is faulty performance. Only faults impart sensations. When you sing correctly, you do not necessarily know what is happening nor how it is being done. Even the best artists cannot always tell exactly how they sing, because the vocal response is automatic and habitual and therefore no longer subject to conscious control.

Confusing mere technical virtuosity with artistic singing ability has led to the acceptance of much synthetic performance as a finished product. Unfortunately, many a pupil is prematurely presented to the public whose training has not yet reached the level of habit formation; and, as a result, stilted, mechanical part-learning techniques are mistakenly exhibited as artistic performances. Such presentations are disappointing to all concerned. The teacher should remember that vocal freedom is an unconscious thing. But it is built on a foundation of well-established habits.

To reiterate, therefore, the final aim of every singer is to attain such freedom, flexibility and spontaneity of expression that the singing voice will *seem* to be a natural endowment rather than an acquired skill. This effect is possible only when correct coordinations have been trained to the point of complete habit formation. Such a response is the product of a carefully planned practice procedure which is repeated until mind and muscle have become adequately conditioned.

When strait-laced tradition is unduly enforced in singing, vocal behavior gradually loses its individuality and becomes stereotyped through the habitualized use of imitative forms. Conversely, stereotyped expression is avoided by building traits of independence, original-

ity and uniqueness into the singing personality. This requires the constant exercise of creative imagination.

It is the teacher's function therefore, to guide and supervise this physical, mental and moral growth of the pupil through the application of appropriate but carefully graded practice and study routines. The result is dependable, habitualized artistic behavior under all circumstances. ARTISTIC SINGING IS A PRODUCT OF HABIT FORMATION. That is the second guiding principle.

Self-expression Factors in Singing. The third principle is that self-expression through voice is a basic human instinct. It is primitive. It is inborn. An infant cries at birth without previous training. The primitive development of the vocal function is also closely related to survival and well-being, as in the case of cries for help, cries for food, cries of defense and offense, exclamations of joy, surprise, pain, etc. Gregarious members of any species will call and cry out to keep in touch with one another vocally.

Man has evolved language from what originated as simple cries and calls. Through the use of his intelligence he has codified these sounds and thus the words of speech were gradually formed. Later, he developed the forms of vocal relaxation and entertainment that we call song. Whatever the mood, love, anger, joy or hate, the voice produces corresponding effects. But, basically, it may be said that all vocal utterance is founded on this primitive impulse to express and communicate.

The artistic expression of the singing voice is therefore but an outgrowth, an evolution through specialized development, of this basic function. The vocal student must capture the idea that all vocal utterance, and therefore singing, is built upon the desire to express something. Thus he preserves the innate spontaneity of the voice, even while technical virtuosity is being achieved through discipline and specialized training. In other words, the purpose of the singer is not just to sing a mechanically perfect tone with each sound that is uttered, but also to express intelligible thought in song. This is one of the first ideas to impress upon a pupil. When verbal tones acquire communicative intent and meaning, singing becomes an act of purposeful expression which motivates and helps release the voice.

Voice grows out of language, out of a desire to communicate ideas. Singing, in a sense, is another language. The accomplished artist sings to communicate his ideas,

not merely the tones of his song. His desire to say something influences his method and manner of voice production. This long-established principle of voice training was recognized by bel canto masters. They pronounced the dictum that there is no singing without saying; that technique and expression are inseparable; and that it is necessary to teach them together, side by side, from the start. "You must sing as you speak," they would say. "Say something as you sing, and have something to say."

A song always tells a story. If self-expression were the uppermost desire in song, singing could become as effortless as speaking. There is no right or wrong way of accomplishing this end, since the emergence of individual traits in the singer is a characteristic of wholesome growth. It is not an artificial product. The primary purpose of voice teaching, therefore, is to develop a singing personality, not a routine mechanical skill. The aim is to free, not freeze, the pupil's personality, and all technical instruction must serve this end.

In modern vocal pedagogy, artistic singing is to be regarded as a *whole* response supported by every function and faculty of the human organism. Therefore, we must get away from the notion that a singer is a mere performer on the larynx. He is much more than that. He is engaged in an act of artistic creation in which the entire individuality is brought into play. Furthermore, he is both instrument and performer combined. Mind, heart, lungs and larynx, muscles, nerves, glands, sight, hearing—all are united into one marvelously synchronized instrument of expression.

At this point, let it suffice to consider, as a basic psychological principle, that the whole organism is not merely the arithmetic sum of all its parts, but also the harmonious agreement of each part with all other parts.

Therefore, we cannot readily isolate a specific element in the vocal tract for separate treatment without considering its effect on the synchronous action of the whole organism. When this principle is violated, however slightly, trouble appears. Even the minutest deviation exacts a toll in wear and tear, injury, or failure to perform its normal function. It is this *wholeness* of individual expression that makes singing different from the performance of any man-made musical instrument.

The belief in the localized control of the vocal organs has led to some fantastic and misleading theories. Local effort or concentrating upon vocal muscles tenses them

abnormally and, in fact, any conscious control of the larynx or throat can only lead to constriction and impairment of the vocal function. In human expression, the vocal cords work automatically. It is useless to think of them, since tone production comes by mental direction.

We conclude, therefore, that the main purpose of vocal training is to free the voice from self-conscious behavior. You don't have to work to sing. You *let* yourself sing as you might let yourself see or hear or breathe. Self-conscious vision is impaired vision. Self-conscious breathing would be unhealthy breathing. Self-conscious singing is stilted singing. *Don't strive—let!* is the motto for singers.

To obtain this effect, all preliminary technical disciplines must ultimately surrender to the processes of thinking, to mental controls and, as previously stated, to correctly formed habits.

Singing thus becomes a means of self-expression. It is governed by concentration, interest and enthusiasm, by right thinking and feeling and the desire to communicate these thoughts and feelings to others. These are basic impulses that guide and govern vocal expression, whether it be in speech or song. Therefore, we accept as our third guiding principle that SELF-EXPRESSION THROUGH VOICE IS A HUMAN INSTINCT which will condition every vocal response in singing.

The Joy of Singing. A final principle that emerges in this review of mental controls is that singing is essentially an expression of joy in living. People sing spontaneously when they are enjoying themselves. Joy is defined as a sense of well-being and exhilaration of spirit that comes from the experience of being free from worry or restraint of any kind. Complete freedom of mind and body is conducive to enjoyment. Conversely, a mood of enjoyment helps to release and relax every part of the body, including the vocal organs. Joy spells freedom; freedom brings enjoyment. A person is happiest when free. In daily living, we sing for sheer enjoyment and we enjoy what we sing—if we sing at all.

The singing lesson itself, therefore, should be a joyous experience. If it is not, inhibitions, frustrations, emotional tension and restrained behavior will be built into the vocal act.

Overcautious teaching methods, with an overdose of rules and warnings, will tend to dampen a pupil's enthusiasm for learning. It is, perhaps, unwise to use

such directions as: *Don't let your chest slump! Don't forget to hold your chin in! Keep your posture erect! Breathe with your diaphragm! Don't keep your tongue too high! Place the tone upward and forward! Don't forget your phrasing! Watch your diction! Close the vowel! Open the throat! etc.! etc.!* How can a pupil be joyous under these conditions?

Critical admonitions like the foregoing are inimical to good vocal behavior, since criticism begets self-consciousness, caution and fear. The antidote, of course, is praise and encouragement. The teacher should find something genuinely praiseworthy, and use that element of commendation as a basis for instruction whenever possible. Instead of: *Don't let your chest slump!*, he might try: *Your posture is always best when you hold your chest high. That's fine!; Your tone is excellent when you feel that you are communicating it to a listener; You are improving steadily;* etc. Substituting *do's* for *dont's* and praise for criticism will build a mood of enjoyment during the singing lesson.

Why enjoyment? Because the voice functions at its best when the singer is buoyant and exhilarated. Because carefree attitudes are conducive to vocal freedom.

Laughter is an exercise that will improve freedom of vocal action. When laughter is difficult, there is evidence of tension, either mental or physical, in the student's make-up. Ask him to laugh on each tone that is sounded. If he can do this readily, vocal action will tend to be free, because genuine laughter is not possible under conditions of strain, fear or worry.

In summation, anything that works against the *pleasure* of singing also works against voice production. Self-consciousness can become part of an inhibited vocal technique and bad habits are thus formed. Singing should be made a pleasure, always, rather than a task and, to obtain best results, the vocal lesson should be made joyous, buoyant and inspirational.

It is well to remember, also, that the pupil's interest and enthusiasm are impelling forces in the growth of his singing voice; that artistic singing contains a thrill and liberation of spirit, that pleasure helps to release the voice. Even the singing of sad or tragic music must be enjoyed to be effective.

In other words, joy is the great corrective. Joyous moods expand the breathing, relax muscles, and correct faulty coordinations. They release the voice and make

for efficient operation of the vocal organs because SINGING IS ESSENTIALLY AN EXPRESSION OF JOY. That is our fourth guiding principle.

In conclusion, we have uncovered four fundamentals that suggest how the mind governs the singing voice. They are: (1) mental imagery governs vocal control; (2) the singer's voice is a product of habit formation; (3) self-expression through voice is a basic human instinct; and (4) singing is essentially an expression of joy in life. The effective teacher will memorize these principles, since they underlie all teaching and practicing procedures. Guiding principles like these translate themselves into specific objectives, which may now be restated as: (1) cultivating mental imagery; (2) building good habits; (3) developing freedom of expression; (4) stimulating joyous attitudes.

In all forms of teaching, objectives must remain fixed if learning is to be accomplished. On the other hand, methods may be adaptable to individual needs. Successful voice teaching, therefore, must embody fixed goals and a flexible and varied methodology.

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