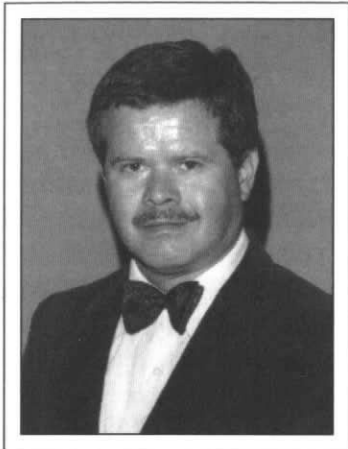


# Imagery in Early Twentieth-Century American Vocal Pedagogy



Donald Callen Freed

During a recent opera radio broadcast, two professional singers—internationally known artists—were questioned as to how they mastered the technique of “breath support” for singing. One singer described her training as based on physiological function, where her teacher described and demonstrated the muscular action involved with good “breath support.” The other singer described an image that she had been taught in the technique of “breath support”—floating a ping-pong ball above the breath.

Both singers are successful and have long-standing careers. There has been much talk of the standardization of vocal pedagogy in the scientific age. Yet questions about the use of imagery continue. Let us investigate this issue in an historical perspective.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Imagery has long been in use, whether as a primary or auxiliary mode of teaching singing. Because of scientific advances, imagery and empirical teaching are regarded less favorably by pedagogues, especially for building the foundation of technique. Richard Miller has stated:

Vague imagery is insufficient for adequate communication. The teacher may well know what a “rounder” sound means to him or her, but the term itself does not tell the student what “rounder” means nor how to “round” the sound. Asking for more or less space in some particular part of the vocal tract can produce a wide variety of results, most of them not intended. The reluctant student may be perfectly right to resist the pedagogy being presented because it is based on illogical verbiage.

Putting the tone “up the back of the throat wall and over into the forehead,” “into the masque,” “down the back of the throat,” “out the chimney on the top of the head,” or “out the funnel at the back of the neck,” “singing on the breath,” and “spinning the tone” are useless admonitions, inasmuch as none of these things can be done (Miller, 1998, pp. 41–42).

In related commentary, Miller also states: “Most singers are in need of precise technical information that goes beyond the language of imagery.” Yet, in the same chapter, Miller indicates that:

There is a role for some imagery in the teaching of technique. Technical imagery, however, is mostly of value if it is associated with *already* established, repeatable functional freedom. *After* the singer has learned to coordinate breath management and proper laryngeal and resonatory responses, an *image* may be useful in unifying those functions. The superimposition of imagery on the student beforehand may bring more confusion than assistance (Miller, 1996, pp. 3–4).

Thus, despite cautions about the use of imagery, Miller indicates that it may successfully complement the teaching of basic technical concepts.

Another noted pedagogue, Cornelius Reid, points out the conflict between the use and non-use of imagery in pedagogy:

To a certain extent, vocal instruction is impossible without imagery, since even the most elemental scale pattern must be conceptualized before it can be executed. However, the successful realization of a preconcept depends upon an ability to respond, which in turn is a matter of physical coordination. Since the student has presented himself in order to overcome obvious physical disabilities, the use of imagery cannot be considered pertinent to the central issue. Imagery, therefore, is not an important factor in the voice building process (Reid, 1983, p. 155).

Reid’s *A dictionary of vocal terminology: An analysis* (1983) describes terms which are used as imagery and have little functional basis. Reid’s analysis admittedly is

his own, and while his work is significant, he does not indicate the method he used for his analysis. However, in at least two definitions of imagery-related terms, Reid indicates that the image may be helpful for the pedagogue and the student.

For decades, other pedagogues have pointed to the controversy between scientific and empirical methods of teaching voice (Jorgensen, 1980; Fields, 1972; Hisey, 1970; Wohlmann, 1953; McLean, 1951; Bartholomew, 1935). Hisey has traced this difference to the writings of Garcia and F. Lamperti. Texts from the early twentieth-century show differences in terms used and illustrate differences between scientific and empirical teaching.

A few pedagogues (McClean, 1951; Van den Berg & Vennard, 1959; Jorgensen, 1980; Titze, 1986a, 1986b) have indicated that vocal pedagogy suffers from the lack of standardized terminology, and that imagery may contribute to this problem. Pedagogues in areas other than vocal pedagogy have promoted the use of imagery to solve both technical and musical problems (Ristad, 1982; Green & Gallwey, 1986).

The purpose of this study is to investigate the use of imagery in early twentieth-century textbooks on singing and vocal pedagogy, in order to trace some uses of imagery in American vocal pedagogy and compare them with images identified as current usage.

This study is limited to terms and descriptions involving imagery, exclusive of illustrations. Terms chosen from Reid's dictionary were based on either his definition of a term as being involved with imagery or with the author's knowledge of imagery versus scientific pedagogy.

Imagery is defined as comparative language, simile, metaphor, or a picture which may or may not reflect physical reality. Some key words include: imagine, picture, like, as, and descriptive phrases that indicate use of imagery.

1. What are the significant images used by early twentieth-century pedagogical writers?
2. How do these images compare with recent imagery identified by pedagogical writers?
3. Can the images from this period be categorized? If so, what are the categories?
4. Were more images used during this period in one specific area of vocal pedagogy than others?

### Related Literature

Three pedagogues have attempted to define terminology, including imagery. Fields (1947) examined books and articles in American vocal pedagogy from the period 1927-1942. Burgin (1973) summarized vocal concepts from the time of Fields' study to 1970. Like Fields, Burgin discussed the difference between the "scientific" and "empirical" approaches to teaching singing, a difference which is rooted in the difference between the pedagogies of Manuel Garcia and Francesco Lamperti. Similar to the studies of Fields and Burgin is that of Monahan (1978), which covers the period from 1777 to 1927. The conclusions are similar: A wide variety of terminology and methods is used. However, in all of these studies, imagery is a by-product and not a separate area of analysis.

Wilson (1989) concluded that teachers use many ways to teach breathing, but disagree about what

are good breathing directives. Her study used a modified Delphi (survey-resurvey) technique, which attempted to arrive at consensus concerning the most important directives. Ninety-three directives were generated in Spillane's original survey, indicating the diversity used by pedagogues; much use of imagery is present in these directives.

Finally, Swank (1984) determined that a change in terminology can affect a change in vocal production. And in Reid's *A Dictionary of Vocal Terminology: An Analysis*, imagery is offered as a term.

### PROCEDURE

Historical texts investigated depended upon availability and include the items preceded by an asterisk in the References. The other materials were Reid's *Dictionary* and recent writings by Miller.

The researcher examined textbooks for descriptions involving imagery using an historical-qualitative approach. Relevant terms and descriptions were placed in a single computer file, which was then examined and annotated for use of similar terms and concepts. Frequency in a source was determined. These images were compared with those identified by Reid (1983) and Miller (1996, 1998).

Texts from both periods were subjected to content analysis. The analysis included terms used and their definitions which were analyzed and compared for similar imagery-related definitions and concepts. Annotations were made in the computer file, and word search was used to find the use of similar imagery concepts among sources.

Terms and concepts, as well as relevant quotes, were placed in the computer file, providing a base for comparison. Tables were constructed indicating frequency of an image and compared with modern sources.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Thirty-four of 44 texts (77%) from the period 1900–1910 were available for analysis. Reid's *A Dictionary of Vocal Terminology* was analyzed for contemporary terminology and concepts related to vocal imagery; 41 entries were identified. Of these 41 entries, 38 terms or related images were found in the texts from 1900–1910. Thirty of these concepts were found in the recent writings of Richard Miller (1996, 1998). The greatest number of images was related to the concept of breath support ( $N = 23$ ), followed by sensations ( $N = 9$ ), placement ( $N = 9$ ), place the voice ( $N = 9$ ), and head and mouth resonance, followed by focused or floating tone ( $N = 6$ , respectively). Other concepts that ranked relatively high ( $N = 5$ , respectively) were "spinning the tone," nasal resonance, and air stream, with other concepts ranking lower. Three images identified by Reid did not appear in the texts 1900–1910: bite into the tone, hooty tones, and vomit the tone. This information is represented in Table 1. Of the 34 texts, five were primarily scientific in nature and included little or no imagery.

Thirty of the 38 terms involving imagery in the early twentieth century (79%) are still identifiable near the end of the century. As recently as 1983, 92% of the images

found in the early twentieth century could be identified in Reid.

Other, more colorful images did not appear in modern sources. They include other breath management directives (Table 2); the function of the voice compared with other musical instruments; and more unusual general directives (Table 3).

Despite the advances of science and the increased use of technology in vocal pedagogy, contemporary sources have identified that imagery still receives much use, and is still the foundation for some pedagogues. Many of the imagery-related concepts from the early twentieth century are still identifiable at the end of the century. How much has changed?

Five pedagogy texts from 1900–1910 included little or no imagery. While this is not a great percentage (11%), and there are many more scientific writings in vocal pedagogy today, there were still pedagogues whose basis for vocal pedagogy was primarily scientific. Two commentators from the early twentieth century, just as Miller and Reid have in recent times, indicated that imagery should not be the primary foundation of vocal pedagogy: David Taylor and W.J. Henderson. If one reads the commentary of Taylor, one might think his commentary applies today:

To enumerate and classify all the methods of instruction in vogue would be almost an impossibility. Absolutely no uniformity can be found on any topic. Even among the accepted doctrines of Vocal Science there are many controverted points. . . . Every vocal teacher selects the materials of instruction from these controverted doctrines, but neither rule nor reason determines what materials shall be embodied in any one method. There is no coherence whatever in the matter. Further, there is no

agreement as to which topics of instruction are most important. One teacher may emphasize breath-control and support of tone as the foundations of the correct vocal action, another may give this position to nasal resonance and forward placing. Yet both these teachers may include in their methods about the same topics. The methods seem entirely different, only because each makes some one or two doctrines the most important. In short, it might almost be said that there are as many methods as teachers (Taylor, 1908, pp. 97, 99).

Today's situation may seem extreme. Yet there are still teachers who remain uninformed about physiological function.

Taylor goes on to say:

Under the influence of the idea of mechanical vocal management there is little room for choice between voice culture along empirical lines, and the accepted type of scientific instruction. Modern empirical voice training has little practical value. Describing to the student the sensations which ought to be felt, does not help in the least. Even if the sensations felt by the singer, in producing tone correctly, are entirely different from those accompanying any incorrect use of the voice, nothing can be learned thereby. The sensations of correct singing cannot be felt until the voice is correctly used. An effect cannot produce its cause. Correct tone-production must be there to cause the sensations, or the sensations are not awakened at all. Nothing else can bring about the sensations of correct singing, but correct singing itself (Taylor, 1908, pp. 114–115).

This view appears to agree with those of Reid and Miller—that imagery be used little or not at all, and if so, only after physiological problems of singing are primarily solved.

Henderson, in his introduction to Marchesi's *Ten Singing Lessons: Preface by M. Melba* (1901), also refutes the use of imagery in teaching:

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**Table 1.** Imagery-related terms from Cornelius Reid, *A Dictionary of Vocal Terminology* (1983), with frequencies, compared with related imagery in texts 1900–1910, and with recent pedagogical writings by Richard Miller (1996, 1998)

Image in Reid	N Sources 1900–1910	Alternate Term 1900–1910	Miller
Breath support/breath control [Reid: fallacy]	23		yes
Sensations	9		yes
Placement	9		yes
Place the voice	9		yes
Resonance, mouth	6		yes
Resonance, head	6		yes
Focused tone	6		yes
Floating tone	6	needle point, whistle, steam pipe buoyant	yes
Spin the tone/ <i>file la voce/nota filare</i> [Reid: can be effective image]	5		yes
Resonance, nasal	5		yes
Air stream	5	current (singular)	
Too far back	4	veiled, sepulchral, gargling	yes
Relaxation	4	collapse on sofa, sigh	yes
Vortex theory/whirling currents [difference in defining resonance and internal pressure]	3	air molecules	
Resonance, sounding board	3		yes
On the breath [Reid: can be effective image]	3	vocalized breath	yes
Forward tone	3		yes
Drink in the tone/ <i>Inhalare la voce</i>	3		
Above the breath	3		
Voice as mind	2		
Sitting on the breath	2		yes
Reedy tone	2		yes
Mask (in the mask, <i>dans la masque</i> )	2		yes
Lift of the breath	2		yes
<i>Bocca ridente</i> /toothy singing	2		
Up and over	1		yes
Resonance, chest	1		yes
Relax the throat	1		yes
Project	1		yes
Ping	1	ring	yes
Learn to sing by singing	1	natural methods	yes
Intercostal lift	1	pull at ribs	yes
Imagination	1		yes
Illusion	1		
Hum on the tongue	1		yes
Get it out of the throat	1		yes
<i>Cupo</i> (cupped tone)	1		
Building on the soft	1		yes
Vomit the tone	0		
Hooty tones	0		
Bite into the tone	0		yes

I have said that the world is full of charlatans. There are teachers who tell their pupils to sing from their feet, and others who tell them to get their tones out of the backs of their heads. Some advocate singing entirely from the stomach, and

others even ask their pupils to sing from the pelvis. And most of these are at the same time requiring from their students such vicious methods of tone formation that inflamed vocal chords and aching throat muscles tell the pupils that some-

where in the region of the larynx sounds are really made (pp. xii–xiii).

Yet Henderson seems to have contradicted himself by using imagery

**Table 2.** Other breath management imagery/directives 1900–1910

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Breathe with the throat  
 Bad diction throws breath out of gear  
 Bellows—lungs, body function like bellows (10)  
 Windchest  
 Air blast (3)  
 Gain control of bronchials, gain control of breath  
 Artistic breathing  
 Motive power  
 Motor man and brake—breath control  
 Diaphragm is guardian angel of lungs  
 Breath should flow like gossamer filament  
 Breath like water in locks of canal—balance, release  
 Breath like water flowing out of a bottle  
 Abdominal breathing for singing like that of baby or sleeping lion  
 Diaphragm is “guardian angel” of lungs  
 Controlled energy begins at the bottom of the vocal apparatus and is completed at the top  
 Bronchial tubes are like tree branches of windpipe, extend to lungs, which inflate like balloon  
 Abdominal breathing better called “abominable.”  
 Pack the lungs with extra breath when possible  
 Keep the lungs well opened  
 Keep base of lungs wide and solid on diaphragm  
 Equipoise, or the balance of muscular forces  
 Artistic tension  
 Stream of air as a glass-blower maintains the stream of breath  
 A shaky, uncontrolled breath is like a rickety foundation  
 Lungs are empty sacks into which the air drops like a weight; fill bottom first  
 Take air in and send it out in little puffs

---

**Table 3.** Other images 1900–1910

*Voice and function of the apparatus compared with instruments:*

- flute
- piccolo
- oboe
- organ, cathedral organ
- organ pipe
- trumpet
- harp string
- violin
- Amati violin
- pipe with double reed
- cello
- bell
- lips of horn player

*More unusual imagery*

- Enunciate within the lungs
  - Crescendo and vowel come from the abdomen
  - Voice has one register, the Facial Register
  - Flexibility in singing is birdlike
  - Make a picture of beautiful tone, then produce it now.
  - Tone is like the finest chemical compound
  - The “smiling looseness” of the face—alert, but never with fixed grin
- 

to describe Nellie Melba’s singing, perpetuating the language of imagery while previously shunning it:

It was not an attack at all. She just opened her lips, and the tones dropped out like the pearls from the mouth of the princess in the fairy tale. Or one might liken an attack of this kind to the beginning of the flow of water when a faucet is turned. The clucking attack sounds like the lighting of gas; the aspirated attack like the turning on of electric light in which the click of the switch always precedes the appearance of illumination (Henderson, 1906, pp. 52–53).

Despite this commentary, use of imagery continues in American vocal pedagogy. With all our scientific progress, how can this be? There are two reasons: the oral tradition and successful performers who become teachers, teaching based on their own sensations.

### Oral Tradition and Varied Schools

In both the early twentieth century and the present day, I have referred to the use of written imagery. Yet much of voice teaching is an oral tradition, where pedagogical ideas are passed from teacher to student. In the United States, more than in other countries, pedagogues represent different backgrounds because of national schools of pedagogy:

There is no American national school of singing because teachers trained in each of the national vocal traditions have continued to go their diverse ways; within American pedagogy there is less unity of approach than in any of the major countries of Western Europe (Miller, 1977, p. 201).

## Hiring Performers, Pedagogues, or Both

The conflict between the scientific and empirical may also continue because of the hiring policies of departments or schools of music. Read the latest advertisements for job listings in voice. Some institutions place an emphasis on pedagogy and scholarship in addition to performance. Other institutions have advertisements like this: "Associate professor of voice. National reputation; outstanding singer with a professional performing career; must be dedicated to teaching." Singers with the performing careers, having little training in pedagogy, may be able to sense what is right in singing for themselves, but what about teaching the beginning student?

## Implications for Teaching

Should the knowledgeable teacher use imagery? The answer to this question must be a guarded yes. The teacher certainly should know the difference between image and physiological truth. More often, the imagery used should help to reinforce a physiological principle, and the difference should be explained. However, contrary to Miller's opinion that imagery should only be used at an advanced level, the author has seen instances where the image has induced a more unified function at a fundamental level. The concepts involving imagery, often solving technical problems through nontechnical approaches, presented by Ristad (1982), and Green and Gallwey (1986), are popular, and their effect on vocal pedagogy will not soon disappear. Even "green and blue" pedagogy was introduced to this teacher by a student who thinks a certain

color to lighten her voice. Indeed, if it is true that the sensations of "correct" singing can only be felt when singing "correctly," how else does one *get* the experience if science fails? Is "raise the zygomatic arch" more scientific than "place the tone in the masque"? Or is this a matter of more scientific terminology to describe the same process?

Other images have been successful with students, including "just sing it out," "get it out of the throat," "breathe into the center of the head," "let the sound come out through a hole in the center of your head," "sing on a very thin and compact air stream," to name a few. Are these ideas valid for use in the studio? Ultimately, the discerning ear and eye of the teacher must determine if the result is a more aesthetic singing. If so, imagery can hardly be discounted, although the student eventually should be made aware of physiological truth. The empirical use of sensations may be suspect; however, if teachers help students identify sensations and help them reoccur, it is difficult to fault the method, whether scientific or empirical. Teachers should also determine what terminology the student already knows through questioning. The old maxim, "what works," may indeed be appropriate, but if an image is used to induce a favorable coordination, the imagery should be integrated with "what is true," whether the image is a calculated or spontaneous choice in the lesson.

As more colleges and conservatories require demonstration lessons or master classes for prospective faculty, committees should consider whether the pedagogy works. The question of the "diva" versus the

academically trained vocal pedagogue is likely to persist for some time. True, there can be some middle ground, but the best performers have not always been schooled in pedagogical principles and correct physiology, nor how to apply these principles to individual students who may present a variety of vocal problems, whether or not imagery is used.

Imagery and opinions about its use will continue. Even Reid and Miller do not completely discount the use of imagery. The results of this study would suggest that use of imagery should, in any case, be based on understanding of physiological reality.

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