

The Syntax of Voice Technique



Richard Miller

Written questions that teachers and performers have submitted for discussion at sessions devoted to systematic voice technique are wide ranging, often penetrating the very heart of voice pedagogy. Sotto voce continues to consider some of them.

Question:

It has been stated that many promoted approaches to singing technique are overly complex. You appear to advocate simplification of voice pedagogy by coordinating just three factors: breath, larynx, and resonators. In general—not in specific pedagogic terms—how would you describe your own concept of this process?

Comment:

This is a big question. There is no doubt that cultivated singing depends on complex patterned sequences. The questioner is correct that in the judgment of this writer, the most important matter in the area of voice technique is that recommended learning patterns should

concern coordinating the breath process, vocal fold vibration, and the filtering effect of the resonator tract.

Voice pedagogy can be thought of as a form of syntax. Although we generally associate the word with grammatical construction, syntax occurs in all learning processes. It is best described as the ability to devise and follow complex programs of action, making use of either tools, signs, words, and physical coordination, or all of them. Dictionary definitions of syntax include: “to put together,” “to put in order,” “a connected system or order,” “an orderly arrangement,” and “harmonious adjustment of parts or elements.”

A singer must put together those elements that produce a dependable adjustment that will meet the specific tasks of singing. Singing tasks go far beyond the requirements of other forms of phonation. Technique in every field of endeavor depends on a connected system or structure. For that reason, a systematic approach to voice pedagogy is appealing because, without a structured learning system (an orderly arrangement), there seldom can be a harmonious adjustment of the parts and elements that produce the singing instrument.

Each of those elements—in this case, the motor, the vibrator, and the resonator—must be put together in a harmonious adjustment. Any action that goes beyond the most primitive gesture requires complex programming, achieved through repetition. Singing is certainly one of the highest forms of physical, mental, spiritual, and communicative activity, re-

quiring consummate coordination of all its parts. Reiteration of syntactical maneuvers leads to permanent behavior in performance.

Mention was made that some pedagogies are more complex than necessary. Simplification, not complication, should be the goal of all teaching. It is unnecessary to invent functions (unfortunately the case in some pedagogies that do not follow the historic international school of singing) for any of the three major contributors to phonation: breath, larynx, resonator.

Why contrive abdominal muscle groups that do not exist? Why maintain that functions of the larynx can be improved through the introduction of noncontrollable local maneuvers? Why invent resonance spaces and domes that are not discoverable? It is far easier, far simpler, and far faster to present recognizable physical and acoustic facts about the singing voice, and it is far more honest. The syntax of artistic singing is most quickly built on a structure of accurate information, not on a system of invented structures and imagined controls.

Among Richard Miller's many activities and honors are: Internationally acclaimed masterclasses; recurrent engagements in Austria, Australia, Canada, England, France, Germany, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, 38 US states. Voice research in Belgium, the Czech Republic, England, Finland, France, Italy, Hungary, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland. Distinguished international opera, oratorio, and recital career. Tenor soloist with Knappertsbusch, Ackermann, Ludwig, Se-

bastian, Slatkin, Lane, Szell, Boulez, etc. Pedagogy/performance texts: English, French, German and Italian Techniques of Singing (Scarecrow, 1977, revised 1997), The Structure of Singing (Schirmer Books, 1986) [French Ministry of Culture La Structure du Chant (1990)], Training Tenor Voices (Schirmer Books, 1993), On the Art of Singing (Oxford University Press, 1996), Singing Schumann: An Interpretive Guide for Performers (Oxford University Press, 1999), Training Soprano Voices (Oxford University Press, 2000). Editor, Liszt: 25 French and Italian Songs, Liszt: 22 German Songs, High/Low (International Music, 1998); 120 professional journal articles. Chevalier/Officier, L'ordre des arts et des lettres (French Ministry of Culture honorary); Doctor of Humane Letters; Otolaryngology Adjunct Staff, Cleveland Clinic; Collegium. Medicorum. Theatri; American Academy; Prof/Director, Vocal Arts Center; Wheeler Professor of Perfor-

mance, Oberlin Conservatory. International adjudicator at primary competitions. Students contracted at major opera houses

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