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Voice Pedagogy for Aging Singers (Including the Author)

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MY ANNUAL “RAINBOW OF HOPE” benefit concert on November 13, 2011, had a decidedly patriotic theme to it since it took place on Veterans Day weekend and was near the tenth anniversary of the September 11, 2001, attacks. Many of America’s best loved songs were featured: the “Star Spangled Banner,” “God Bless America,” a George M. Cohan medley, Woody Guthrie’s “This Land Is Your Land,” and Larson’s “A Tribute to the Armed Services.” The program peaked when I invited World War II Navy veteran, Henry Holt Jr. on stage. One month shy of his 90th birthday, Henry sang the beautiful Navy hymn, “Eternal Father, strong to save.” I then joined him in a rousing two man rendition of the Wilhousky arrangement of “Battle Hymn of the Republic.” The audience was on its feet as we held out the final “amen.”

I’m proud to say Henry Holt Jr. is a student of mine. He’s been a regular for over ten years and is my “poster child” for longevity in singing as well as a personal vocal hero. If I am still alive at age 90, I not only hope to be singing, but singing as well as Henry is.

Now that the leading edge of Baby Boomers has turned 65, voice pedagogy for the aging singer is sure to become a hotter topic in NATS. I have an even more personal and vested interest in the subject ever since that little red, white, and blue Medicare card went into my wallet in June of 2011. If some of us are on Henry’s schedule (and my family genetic history says I might be), we could have as much as 25 years of performing ahead of us.

So what keeps us going? The strategies and techniques used to implement and maintain healthy, efficient, and artistic singing practices with Henry and other aging singers are not radically different from those we would use to teach younger voice students. All singers need to continually address the individual aspects of the singing system, the “**tions**,” as I like to call them: body **position**, respiration, audiation, phonation, resonance, articulation, and emotion. What is different for older singers is yet another “**tion**,” that one being expectation. Dr. Robert T. Sataloff, in a 2000 “LaryngoSCOPE” article, provided us with a veritable laundry list of challenges that aging can present, including deteriorating bodily functions that affect accuracy, speed, endurance, stability, strength, coordination, breathing capacity, nerve conduction velocity, heart output, and kidney function. He further tells us that muscle and nerve tissues atrophy, and the chemicals responsible for nerve transmission change. Ligaments atrophy and cartilages turn to bone (including those in the

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larynx). Joints develop irregularities that interfere with smooth motion. The vocal folds themselves thin and deteriorate, losing their elastic and collagenous fibers. This makes them stiffer and thinner and may correlate with voice changes often noted with aging. The vocal fold edge also becomes less smooth.¹

Fortunately, Dr. Sataloff follows this not so cheery picture with a message of encouragement and hope: "It appears possible that many of these functions can be maintained at a better level than expected until very near the end of life, perhaps allowing a high quality singing or acting career to extend into or beyond the seventh decade."²

Henry came into my studio at the end of his seventh decade, and now, beginning his ninth decade, wants to continue to perform in public for as long as he can. Let me share with you briefly some of what we do in the studio to help make that happen.

We begin with **body position**. To check and reinforce posture, we lift our arms over our heads, thus elevating the rib cage. Since Henry and I know the force of gravity wants to push us over and down, we do this exercise to remind us where optimum alignment should be. So far, gravity has not been victorious. Students less attentive to good posture yet physically flexible, often spend a good portion of the lesson with their arms above their heads while vocalizing.

The **respiration** check involves placing the hands around the bottom of the ribs, with the fingers on the abs in front and the thumbs on the lower back. Inhalation and exhalation that move the ribs and lower torso sends us to the next "**tion**." Excessive movement in the upper body, shoulders, and neck keeps us on this "**tion**" until we get it right. Posture and breathing will be influenced by the singer's physical condition, and age is no excuse for being inactive. With older singers, general muscle tone will have an even greater impact on how much vocal efficiency can be recovered and/or maintained. Therefore, I occasionally need to remind Henry to put down his remote, get out of his comfortable chair, and go for a walk! After that, he's more likely to want to go to the "vocal gym," that is, my exercise CD.

Audiation, also known as the auditory feedback loop, has to do with how we hear and monitor sound. Fortunately, Henry's loop is well tuned and accurate. He has no pitch matching issues and knows what his

voice sounds like both internally and externally. I keep changing the patterns of vocalises to keep him on his toes so that he is not rote responding to familiar intervals. Pitch problems in singers of all ages can often be traced to poor audiation. However, sometimes the problem is that they can hear the pitch, but can't sing the pitch because vocal fold activity is not at an optimum level.

Henry has diminishing vocal fold efficiency, so the "**tion**" called **phonation** gets special attention at our lessons. The question is always, how much of his range limitation is due to naturally deteriorating vocal fold and abdominal muscle tone versus lack of a daily and systematic practice routine? The cliché, "If you don't use it, you lose it" is true for all ages, since we know now that muscles begin to lose strength, coordination, flexibility, and endurance after 48 hours. Henry knows he sounds better when he practices regularly and especially when he engages his upper register or m2 (still unfortunately called "falsetto" by many who should know better). Initially, Henry was reluctant to "sound like a girl" (WWII vets are tough guys). That was until I told Henry about my personal charge from renowned voice teacher and therapist, Oren Brown. Shortly before he died in his 90s, Oren asked me to continue his ongoing battle to legitimize "falsetto" use for better vocal health. Henry was impressed enough to try it and has used it at almost every lesson.

We only know what we can do if we try to do it and fail or succeed. Right now, the more Henry exercises throughout his entire vocal range, the better he sounds. I like him to avoid as much as possible using age-related deterioration as his "get out of jail" card. Will he get his G₄ back? Probably not, but he wants to try to keep his "money notes" from descending too far down.

Also, Henry's vibrato slows down when he doesn't practice or when he over phonates his sound. For that matter, so do 16 year old Kalyn's and 11 year old Stella's. The myth of the old person's vibrato continually needs to be challenged. Vibrato pulse should be under the singer's control as should our next "**tion**," **resonation**.

Resonators can only amplify what comes from the vocal folds. If the acoustic signals are not particularly vibrant, resonators will have little to work with and **resonation** will be compromised. This is much more of an issue for classical singers than rock singers, since the classical style requires a fuller tone quality. Henry is a classically trained singer so he wants that fuller timbre.

Doing resonator-changing exercises—the “wicked witch” sound with lowered soft palate and high nasality on one extreme—and the cowardly lion sound with raised soft palate, significantly lowered larynx, and widened pharynx on the other extreme heightens Henry’s awareness of his resonant choices so he can establish the *chiaroscuro* balance he wants.

Ironically, older adults with dentures face similar challenges as do kids with braces. Muscular conditioning of the tongue, soft palate, lips, etc. via fast moving exercises can be very effective in addressing the issue of clean and precise articulation. Once again, Henry comes through with flying colors with regard to mobility of the articulators. We do a five-note up and down scale exercise that starts with the jaw on a “ya, ya, ya, ya . . . ,” and works its way up and inward via the lips (“ba, ba . . .”), the teeth (“ta, ta . . .”), the tongue (“la, la . . .”), the soft palate (“na, na . . .”), and the throat (“ha, ha . . .”). We turn around and come out the same way we came in.

Mechanistic singers who may have relied heavily on micromanaging voice production and less on story telling usually have a difficult time fully engaging the emotion component. Henry has grown in his ability to connect actor to singer, but still tends to place more value in tone quality than expression. It is an ongoing issue with many of my students, old, young, and in between. Older singers, however, may have an advantage over youth when it comes to incorporating emotion, since age, because of the life experiences that accompany it, often allows older singers to bring a level of emotion to a performance that is not possible in youth. At least that’s what I tell Henry when he’s doing a less than inspiring performance.

Looking around the Contemporary Commercial Music world alone, Henry and I are in fairly abundant company. Many household names are still active performers: Neil Diamond, Bob Dylan, and Paul Simon all turned 70 in 2011. Paul McCartney, who shares my 18th of June birthday, is almost there. Barbra Streisand and Aretha Franklin are both 69. Patti LaBelle is 67 while Cher is 65. Jerry Lee Lewis is 76, Little Richard is 79, Charles Edward Anderson, better known as Chuck Berry, is 85. Interestingly, it took Tony Bennett 85 years to have his first #1 hit record on the Billboard chart. Perhaps we should also include in this group Placido Domingo at 70, since he sang with John Denver, as well

as Marilyn Horne at 78, since she sings duets with 84 year old Barbara Cook.

Age has certainly taken a bit of a toll on Henry. He simply cannot do what he did when he was a younger singer, so things such as key changes and careful choice of repertoire can be very effective in dealing with his aging issues. Adjustments can also be made in phrasing by the judicious use of commas, which will allow for more opportunities to breathe without compromising the piece.

Expectations for those of us singing in the autumn and winter of our lives need to be based on our current vocal abilities. We can fondly revisit the past in our minds, but we must sing in the present. For Henry Holt Jr. and other aging singers, looking to the future also seems to be a really good idea as well.

Henry and I are working on our 2012 summer duet.

NOTES

1. Robert T. Sataloff, “Vocal Aging and Its Medical Implications: What Singing Teachers Should Know, Part 1,” *Journal of Singing* 57, no.1 (September/October 2000): 29–34.
2. Ibid.

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