A Few Insights on Singing with Imagination

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Some vocal technique is already present in every singer. We are wired to communicate well with our voices, both as speakers and as listeners. That basic ability to speak is closely linked to singing, of course. Inborn technique that manifests itself in singing is called talent. Technique and talent ideally function the same way in singing: each is accessed easily and directly as needed, largely without conscious effort.

VOCAL TECHNIQUE

Much of what we call technique is simply an awareness of what is considered good singing, more than specific actions or techniques. This knowledge of process (which may be gained in lessons, classes, even reading) makes it more likely that good things are allowed to happen. It is this allowing that frees up the singer to sing consistently, expressively and powerfully.

Good singing is not unreasonably complicated. Singing is a skill (actually a group of skills) that has much more to do with coordination than intellect, more with imagination than knowledge of physiology and acoustics. Improvement can be a way of life if a few essential techniques are consistently made new. Other than low larynx/high palate (the essential open throat), efficient breath support and a pliable system of resonators and articulators, what other technical fundamentals can there be? Surely the overarching principle of poise and balance, instead of tension and over-pressure, is vital. The essentials are relatively few, though, as agreed on by most reputable teachers. I once read an essay containing a long list of things to think about while singing. In the ordinary sense of left-brain thinking, I strongly disagree with that writer's approach. Rather, thinking with the body can be a helpful way to find the mind/body connection.

One should not confuse relaxed with collapsed/disconnected, or engaged with tense/effortful. Technique and imagination empower each other when the artist confidently and daringly allows them to engage with each other. There are occasions when a singer must think specifically about technique—a particular note or phrase. Boris Goldovsky called these razor blade moments, when the singer is keenly attentive to an essential task. Even during these moments of specific technical intention, the imagination must be allowed to coordinate multiple tasks into a fluid process that seems easy, cohesive, spontaneous, honest, and ultimately convincing. The Alexander concept of availability of motion, more than obvious physical movement, is pivotal in developing the powerful engagement of body and mind.
Thorough training is essential, often over an extended time. As physical coordination and strength become trustworthy and second nature, the imagination is better able to artfully blend vocal and interpretive intentions into unified and inspiring performances.

CHOICES

No singer—particularly the young student who is initially developing his/her vocal technique—should ever be so committed to a particular sound that creativity suffers. This is not to deny technical mastery as a goal, or to say that the expressive end justifies the means. Far from it, as great expression may be found in technique that is limiting, or even damaging! One should rather develop techniques that allow increasing options for both today and tomorrow. The goal of mastering the sound alone will ultimately disappoint; the student will lose motivation and the basic joy of singing—what I call the fun factor—fades.

The increasing options mentioned above are actually choices that the artist makes, based on technical ability and preparation. Imitation is a vital element in identifying those choices. The teacher can be an effective vocal model in lessons (particularly if teacher and student have similar voices). Extensive and frequent listening to live and recorded performances by outstanding contemporary and historical singers is an important way to discover options. Just as art students are found in great museums, copying the masters’ work stroke by stroke, it can be helpful for a young singer to imitate what he hears from established artists. In doing so, she may find her own authentic voice, simply by recognizing what is appealing and somehow inviting in others. There is important vocal and artistic overlap between singers, usually those of similar voice category.

There is certainly more to performing effectively than faithful imitation, good intentions or positive thinking, yet too often singers don't trust their preparation or skill. They attempt a level of conscious control that actually weakens—even sabotages—performance. Trying to perform without effective and frequent practice (thus being constantly on guard, often second-guessing) makes it nearly impossible for valid, true artistic choices to be carried out. Those singers will not develop the technical freedom to empower expressive freedom, and will quickly lose faith in their technical approach. The approach that I suggest is based on poise, balance and flexible strength—not on manipulation—and the singer must be willing to take necessary risks to develop consistency.

The serious student must be willing to experiment with a wide range of choices, attitudes, timbres and vocal directives. Voice lessons, coachings, opera rehearsals, even choral/ensemble rehearsals provide the dedicated student with opportunities to expand her horizons. A teacher, coach or conductor may insist on a particular timbre, intensity level, even a specific vowel
(things that may seem manipulative or severe) but perhaps the singer will find there a positive result that identifies a future choice.

Above all, though, the practice room is the place to discover choices, abilities and talents that have been there all along, simply not recognized. However, the student must not be so focused on technique-building that expressive energy disconnects from the process. If he practices imaginatively, incorporating performing energy all the while, the imagination will ultimately deliver an effective performance, partnered by well-practiced vocal technique.

**TRUST/CONFIDENCE**

One cannot personalize or own a performance without a relatively broad and deep knowledge of what the composer and author have created, as represented by the ink on the page. With thorough and diligent preparation (including helpful research into the text, performance practice, characteristics of composer and poet, etc.), the artist earns the right to be confident. This confidence makes it far more likely that imagination will flourish and produce strong performances. This cycle of preparation—confidence—imaginative performance will constantly inspire the artist to be ever more productive.

Lee Trevino, the beloved golf champion with such a gregarious public persona and surprisingly philosophical mind, was interviewed by Roy Firestone on ESPN, back in the late 1980s. Firestone remarked that Trevino’s winning the US Open as a young, relatively unknown athlete must have been a huge confidence builder. Trevino immediately disagreed, "Oh, no. Let's say I have a 90-yard wedge shot to the final hole of the tournament, with a simple two-putt to win. If I haven't successfully made that shot hundreds of times in practice, all the positive thinking in the world won't help me to win the tournament. Confidence is gained in the practice rounds." Relying on talent, intelligence, adrenaline, superhuman effort, or good luck is no substitute for that confidence. A keener imagination is its fruit.

Marcel Proust said, "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes." This is inescapably true in the process of learning to sing, of learning repertoire, of learning to recognize and appreciate art, of learning to live richly. So very much is already in front of us, around us and within us! We need only to perceive it, actively, earnestly, deeply and more clearly. As the person and the body change somewhat each day, fundamental techniques must be reinterpreted and reincorporated. There can be no substitute for consistent, centered, observant and inspired practice and reflection.

When seen from a larger perspective, each phase of an artist's work is valid; it is one day's version of that person's creation. Today's choices are often built on earlier ones; even if seen as failures, those former choices were made in the light of that day's understanding and perception. No desirable choice carries a guarantee for future success; each choice must be
constantly renewed. Just as significantly (and often the case with young students), true and lasting progress is elusive in the face of desperate preoccupation with the future. Patience is an imperative ingredient in success for singers.

Through good teaching, practice, coaching, observing, listening, imitating, research, conversation, and other performances, the serious artist discovers effective choices that—when engaged—will result in the performances that we dream of!