

Choosing the Best Approach

For Vocal Pedagogy

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Abstract

This paper explores vocal pedagogy from a cultural, historical and methodological basis in an attempt to ascertain whether one can find common ground on the question of what enables a singer to sing well. The author has found that, despite the controversies about how to achieve good vocal production, there is much agreement on many of the basic tenets. Furthermore, it is not necessary to choose a single approach for all situations when these tenets can be met a variety of ways.

What is good singing?

At present it is possible to divide the singing world into a dizzying array of camps. *Rolling Stone* recently devoted an issue to “The 100 Greatest Singers of All Time.” Among them is not a single classical singer, and only a couple that might be classified as jazz. For their part, the jazz and classical worlds have their own pantheon from which they happily exclude the likes of Bob Dylan and Patti Smith. And then there are the other five continents! Within the countries of India, Zaire, Brazil, and so on, there are a range of ideas about singing so vast and historically established that it is simply easier for us as Americans to close our eyes and pretend they don’t exist than to try to use them to define effective vocal technique.

The average American singer, performing with their school or church choir, is caught in the middle of all this “great singing.” If we as choral educators are to guide them, then our conundrum is even greater. It is no longer possible to pretend that one type of singing is superior to another in every way. The sentiments of classically trained, scientifically aware pedagogues such as Richard Miller that any deviation from a classical ideal, even something as commonplace as the “belting” of the Broadway or gospel singer, will destroy the speaking and singing voice will no longer sway many singers who have seen such techniques employed effectively over full careers.¹

Even should we desire to stay safely within the classical camp, relying on the vast number of books and articles published on the subject, we will not avoid confusion. Classical singing itself is neither unified by sound nor technique. There are no less than four distinct schools, emerging from different European geographic regions: Italy, France, Germany and

¹ Miller (1970), 134

England. Richard Miller has made an interesting survey of the four schools in his book, *English, French, German and Italian Techniques of Singing*.

After detailing the various techniques and priorities of the schools for each element of singing, he sums up their differences in terms of intent.

Above all, the Italian singer wants to make beautiful visceral sound which will excite and thrill both the ear and the heart; the French singer wants to present the inherent beauty of the spoken word in sung tone; the German singer wishes to express his or her inner emotions and sentiments to a listening world through poetic insight and the use of illustrative vocal colors; the English singer wishes to perfect the vocal craft itself so that he or she can deal as effectively with musical demands of the literature as can any other instrumentalist.²

To some extent, any singer might wish to do all of these things. Miller's book clarifies the relationship between a singer's priorities and the way various techniques address them.

Among the different national schools, the subject of breathing is perhaps the most divisive: How should one breathe in singing? From where should that breath appear to originate? Is breathing a different act for a singer than the average person? Should one *learn* a special way to breathe, or *unlearn habits* that interfere with the breath? The two greatest differences in approach come between the Italian and French Schools. The Italians favor an idea called *appoggio* which encompasses the idea of supporting breath with a coordinated musculature, made possible through a certain posture involving a pulled-back head and exposed chest. The French take an entirely different approach, believing in something which they call "natural breathing."

² Miller (1970), 194

Miller clearly expresses a preference for the Italian over the French, both on practical and scientific grounds.

Pedagogical perils abound in ignoring the breath process, unless the singer has managed to achieve a coordinated breath technique through individual discovery, which is exceedingly rare. Since what appears to be natural to one singer will not be the same breath approach which comes naturally to another, a number of techniques (or great deficiencies in the applications of the breath) often exist, side by side, within the vocal studio where the so-called natural breathing is taught. Whatever the student habitually has done with the breath then generally continues to be done.³

When viewed with the findings of scientific investigation, it can logically be affirmed that in breath application techniques, singers trained in the tradition of the Italian School do less violation to natural physical function than do singers trained in several other schools.⁴

Another dispute among vocal pedagogues arises over the question of “register.” That is, into how many separate sections can the voice be reasonably separated? Is there such a thing as falsetto, and is it a legitimate use of the voice to produce a singing tone? Among the most interesting answers to these questions is the approach emerging from the German School called “Voice Rebuilding.” The idea is that the singer must completely differentiate the registers of the voice, in particular the head and chest, before integrating them into a highly coordinated single voice in which the components of each balance perfectly upon any note. Miller makes his opinion known on the ramifications of this idea as well.

³ Miller (1970), 40

⁴ Miller (1970), 44

Out of such philosophies a number of pedagogies within the German School have emerged which claim to have rediscovered primitive coordinations lost by modern man. These methods often claim to be able to make singers of everybody, to double the size of any voice, or to produce vocal ranges extending far beyond those normally thought to exist in given vocal categories.⁵

We can see an important pattern emerging in Miller's criticism that is shared by many vocal pedagogues, a notion that there are certain hard and fast truths about singers and the vocal mechanism which have always been apparent to the sensible teacher, and which are being given new legitimacy by scientific evidence. Any attempt to question these truths by non-scientific means, or by the anecdotal evidence of misguided pedagogues is self-deluding and will only lead to the perpetuation of more fallacies about the subject of singing.⁶

In this century many books have been published in which a self-described authority on the voice puts forward his or her opinions on the age-old questions of vocal pedagogy. Very often these texts emerge from one of the philosophies of the above schools, although it is rare that the authors will acknowledge the full extent of the source of their methods.

One of the more compelling books that seems almost diametrically opposed to the philosophies of pedagogues like Richard Miller is *The Free Voice* by Cornelius Reid. Reid is as skeptical of science as Miller is of self-exploration. "Historically, the 'golden age of singing' was a product of empirical teaching, not of teaching influenced in any way by scientifically oriented procedures...It will be the writer's intent in the following pages to reconcile useful scientific

⁵ Miller (1970), 67

⁶ Miller (1970), 200

findings with traditional viewpoints so that the strengths of each can be utilized in the training program.”⁷

Reid suggests that many teachers mistake the “habitual” for the “natural.” In other words, we assume that a “natural” approach is a return to whatever feels most comfortable for the singer in the moment, rather than recognizing that a lifetime of habits can make poor singing *feel* natural and safe. By remaining in their comfort zone, singers fail to realize their full potential.⁸ Reid wishes to generate his improvements through a *truly* natural process, one which is appropriate to the mechanism, but which breaks a student free from habitually harmful or limiting practices.

Reid’s approach can be summed up into two main ideas: The first is to teach a singer to gain voluntary control over the largely involuntary action that occurs in the vocal cords and the shape of the resonators. Rather than attempting what he calls “mechanistic” control over this process, Reid advocates “learning how to permit movement without moving.”⁹ This involves adjusting more voluntary muscles peripheral to the mechanism according to sound and sensation, generating a reciprocal response in the less voluntary muscles.

The second aspect of his approach is voice-building, though at no point does Reid ever mention the German School as his source of inspiration. Reid advocates an initial separation of the head voice from the chest voice. From there, he proceeds to a method whereby the two different types of muscular action can be unified. This method does not involve attempting a direct manipulation of the muscle groups. Instead, a singer learns to recognize the sensation that

⁷ Reid (1965), 5

⁸ Reid (1965), 16

⁹ Reid 1965), 19-20

indicates an ideal relationship between pitch and intensity and find the balance of registration that has made it possible.

Through the discovery of a parallel between a given pitch-intensity pattern and registration the singer is able to learn to unite all three elements of tone into one comprehensive concept, and, as a consequence, bring into being a very special type of physiological adjustment... Changes in vocal technique are brought about most effectively by means of the action and interaction of vocal registers.¹⁰

Reid's explanations make use of anatomical facts that were inaccessible during the *bel canto* era, and his description of voice-building, while perhaps used by many singers before him, German, Italian and otherwise, is supported with scientific observations unavailable to previous generations. Yet we can see a distinctly different philosophy at work from a man who has read the same treatises as Richard Miller, and has come to an entirely different conclusion based upon them. Contrast Reid's attitude toward resonance with that of Miller as stated in his book, *The Structure of Singing*. "A wise route, it might seem, would be to understand the acoustic principle of resonator coupling in singing, and to find some objective technical language to communicate this information."¹¹ Both men believe in using historic and scientific principles, as well as a good ear (and a good teacher). Only the specifics of the process seem to differ.

Russel Hammar entertains a slightly more practical take on these ideas. In his book, *Singing -- An Extension of Speech*, Hammar dives into another of the great controversies of singing – the relationship of the sung word to that of the spoken one and, in particular, the quality of the vowels and consonants that are necessary to produce an exemplary sound.

¹⁰ Reid (1965), 29-30

¹¹ Miller (1986), 61

Hammar's major point is that scientific inquiry has displaced the singer's conception of the pure vowel as a means for finding good tone. He states that "...malformation of the vowel leads to muscular tension (and vice versa), and...this distortion of the resonator (usually the spreading of the vowel) is the central cause of the singer's poor tone production."¹² By using the modified vowels of speech as a starting point, one can extend the sounds towards a purer expression of the vowel to discover the proper balance needed for a given pitch. This is really just a more specific application of the ideas expounded upon by Reid, without the voice-building component.

Hammar does not believe in the dictation of "proper vowel formation" from above. Like Reid, he sees the experience of each singer as unique.

One of the most preposterous outrages inflicted upon the world of vocal pedagogy is the publishing of pictures of how every individual's lips should be formed on a given vowel. Common sense will refute this notion if one considers that some individual's teeth protrude more than others, some mouths are very large and wide (or some very small and narrow), some persons are thick-lipped and other thin-lipped, etc. (This is one reason so many young singers go astray; they imitate rather than emulate their favorite teacher's or singing idol's facial and mouth mannerisms). Moreover, unification of vowel sounds should come from the recognition that each individual's "architecture" must provide the structure for the formation of the vowel sound which he should accurately produce. Therefore, unification of vowel sounds should come from the basic concept that each person's most natural lip and mouth formations should be utilized.¹³

¹² Hammar (1978), 84

¹³ Hammar (1978), 174-5

It is unfortunate, if slightly humorous, that Hammar is unable to recognize the same distinctiveness of a singer's posture and breath-mechanism. In these arenas he proscribes quite specific techniques with which to achieve his vowel goals.

Berton Coffin is an authority who, like Miller, can easily intimidate a reader with his encyclopedic knowledge of pedagogy past and present as well as with his keen appreciation for science. In his historical survey of teaching-techniques he addresses the question of vowel formation with no less gusto than Reid and Hammar, but he describes the situation in very different terms, citing historical precedent as a warning against undue freedom in experimentation with the vocal mechanism.

Vowel modification came from Italy and according to Tosi (1723) I and U were forbidden in vocalization as well as the close forms of E and O. We should keep this in mind in our coaching. Absolute language coaching in singing is a form of vocal destruction as well as a form of forcing poor intonation and weak resonance on singers. Vibrator and resonator are source and system which have an interrelationship which cannot be disregarded, especially in prolonged high dynamics and in the high registers of voices.¹⁴

Yet, far from being a slave to the goals and ideals of the past, Coffin expresses some brilliant insights into the state of singing today. His concern with these challenges extends into every arena, and his observations are remarkably incisive.

Persons who bow their heads have difficulty with high notes because there is not room enough for the depressors to work and the cavity of the throat gives a pitch which is too low...Admittedly, covering places a great pull on the front of the

¹⁴ Coffin (1989), 203

neck and is seen in basses on the back row of choruses. If basses and baritones expect to extend their voices upwards, they will need to develop the musculature on the back of the neck and the back itself which will give them the higher pitched vowels for their high notes. If more teachers would listen functionally with their eyes, when hearing operas and concerts, there would be more understanding and less fear of exploring the techniques of singing.¹⁵

We cannot fault Coffin for the accuracy of these observations, nor for the authoritative remedies he suggests. We may, however, make an observation that Coffin, like Miller, has far less faith in the capacity of the average teacher, much less the singer, to know how to address these challenges on their own. He advocates a full study of the specific dictates of the past masters of the vocal art, and a true comprehension of the facts illuminated by recent discoveries in functional anatomy and acoustics. Again we note that the goals are always the same, but the process for achieving them differs.

As singers and vocal pedagogues, we are expected to take a stand on one side of the debate or the other. We are not allowed to advocate for science as the determiner of truth and simultaneously place our faith in a higher truth that science cannot describe. Adherence to one approach in the face of contradictory information from another is self-deluding, and limits our ability both to learn and to further the cause of spreading the truth. Yet if we pick and choose from whatever philosophy suits us at the moment, we risk the scorn of our colleagues for offering our students contradictory information, leading them and ourselves on a will-o-the-wisp journey that fills our heads with ideas, but does not provide a unified idea of how to sing. How can we overcome this dilemma?

¹⁵ Coffin (1989), 142-3

If one leaps over the details of a particular pedagogue's method for a moment to examine his or her goals, one begins to see a way out of the labyrinth. While unabashedly expressing a preference for the "best elements of the historical tradition of the Italian School," Miller does advise the singer of any nationality to look for an "internationalization of technique...which will equip him or her to sing expressively without violating physical function."¹⁶ It is upon this idea of creating art with the voice in a way that is most appropriate for the mechanism that all teachers will agree.

If we believe in the possibility of more than one outlook on this business of teaching singing, then we can spend our time much more profitably looking both historically and contemporarily on things upon which most pedagogues agree rather than upon what they disagree. Brent Monahan has compiled a remarkable concordance of works upon vocal pedagogy, and his observations on the commonalities, as well as the differences, are very valuable.

Monahan makes the observation that a number of opinions on the teaching of singing were not written down during the *bel canto* era because they were part of the common practice. Unfortunately, the lack of a written record coincided with a vagueness of terminology for various vocal terms which, when interpreted differently by succeeding generations, created a great deal of confusion and opposing methodologies. It became necessary in the late nineteenth century for authors to be more concise in their observations. As the disagreements between these pedagogues are often the result of simple semantic confusion, the subjects upon which they agree become doubly valuable.¹⁷

¹⁶ Miller (1970), 206

¹⁷ Monahan (1978), 45, 228

First, whatever the specifics on breath-support, control or natural breathing, the use of the singer's breath is not to be taken for granted, nor is the posture of the body that supports it.¹⁸ Second, a number of authors agree on the idea that direct control of the muscles of the throat is undesirable and/ or impossible, and that a more generalized use of the body will achieve the best ends.¹⁹ Third, as a means of learning to traverse the registers, scale work is overwhelmingly recommended.²⁰

In addition, Monahan makes this observation on the subject of "self-listening" among vocal pedagogues:

The number of authors who recommend self-listening is more than three times those who do not. Those who disagree with the value of self-listening argue that it is impossible to hear oneself accurately, but that the singer can either develop a means of listening through the help of an objective party or can rely on the aid of his teacher in early study until his own sensational judgments are developed. Also, more than three times the number of authors do than do not agree that sensation is a reliable guide to vocal action, and, once again, those who express doubts admit that sensations have at least limited value in tone production.²¹

Having established a preference among these authors for indirect control of the mechanism and for self-listening as a vital component, it should come as no surprise to us that many of the *bel canto* teachers and the authors who wrote about them believed in using sound and sensation to regulate and make adjustments in the voice.

¹⁸ Monahan (1978), 69-70

¹⁹ Monahan (1978), 78, 138-9

²⁰ Monahan (1978), 158

²¹ Monahan (1978), 184

As a number of authors in this study have remarked, the teachers of the *bel canto* era no doubt observed a more or less self-regulating range mechanism at work within the singer's vocal apparatus. Teachers learned to associate various vibratory sensations in the local areas of the chest, neck and head with different pitch levels in the singer's compass.²²

Monahan also quickly points out the natural consequence of this admittedly subjective method: “With sensation as the only means for analyzing this phenomenon, the rise of a multiplicity of subjectively derived theories is understandable.”²³ Part of the problem was the absence in the 17th and 18th centuries of a clear language for discussing the concept of resonance. It would take the advent of science to provide voice teachers with the vocabulary to adequately discuss this element of singing and its use for the improvement of the vocal sound.²⁴

If we know ahead of time upon which elements the greatest teachers of singing tend to agree, then we can begin to comprehend far more clearly statements such as this by Marchesi: “A singer who has learned how to breathe well, and who has equalized the voice, neatly blended the registers and developed the activity of the larynx and the elasticity of the glottis and resonant tube in a rational manner, so that all possible shades of tone, power and expression can be produced by the vocal organs, would most assuredly be able to sing well, and without fatigue and effort the long and declaimed modern phrases.”²⁵ The same is true of the maxims of G.B. Lamperti : ““If resonance disappears, you have lost the muscular connection between head and chest.”²⁶

²² Monahan (1978), 161

²³ Monahan (1978), 161

²⁴ Monahan (1978), 126-7

²⁵ Coffin (1989), 36

²⁶ Coffin (1989), 94

Yet, armed with the shining truth about singing, we are faced with our original dilemma: How to teach it. Sbriglia declares that “[t]here is no way to tell people how to use their tongues, their lips, or their mouths in singing. It depends on the formation of those organs...Have proper breath support and posture, enunciate clearly, have no tension above the chest, and these things will come to each singer -- differently, to different ones perhaps.”²⁷ Jean di Reszke comes to a similar conclusion, that “no single method of teaching could be effective for all pupils.”²⁸ And the great Enrico Caruso, in his own treatise, stated without reserve that “In general it is better not to stick entirely to one teacher, for it is easy to get into a rut in this way, and someone else may have a quite different and more enlightening way of setting forth his ideas.”²⁹

Perhaps there is no way to truly bridge the gap between the outlook of a scientifically oriented instructor and an empirically minded one. It may be that one approach truly is “correct.” Given the unified goals of all teachers, however, one might suspect that these approaches only seem irreconcilable when one assumes that all singers think alike.

To those of us who have beat our heads upon the altar of science in vain, for whom strict pedagogy has led us to ruin, we rejoice in descriptions in books such as *A Soprano On Her Head* of artists finding epiphanies from unlikely approaches. The title of this book comes from Ristad’s experience of watching a singer vastly improve her sound just by standing on her head. This is an example of exploration in the extreme, a dismissal of all proscriptions for good singing posture, and it resulted in a newfound awareness in the singer that, momentarily, changed her sound.³⁰ Yet, before we get too arrogant, we would do well to recognize that the artists who

²⁷ Coffin (1989), 100

²⁸ Coffin (1989), 104

²⁹ Caruso (1909), 66

³⁰ Ristad (1982), 5-7, 199-201

benefit from these experiences have all been rigorously trained! An empirical, holistic approach has served merely to allow a person to make better use of the information they have acquired.

Similarly, for those of us who put no stake in the innumerable unverifiable claims of artists and teachers with a book to sell, we find great comfort in the unwavering light that science shines upon previously mysterious aspects of our art. We do not see how we can be misled by peer-reviewed science. Yet, putting aside even the obvious notion that new scientific evidence supplants and even contradicts older scientific “truths,” we should be cautious about any approach to information that can be examined without the benefit of human application. The human experience is neither linear nor strictly logical. However helpful it is to teach according to a carefully sequenced curriculum, we are wise to remember that we learn in leaps and revelations, using mistakes as tools, emotions as guideposts, and the immense cleverness of our nervous system as a means of integrating profoundly complicated tasks.

Approaches such as those advocated by Samuel Nelson and Elizabeth Blaydes-Zeller using the *Feldenkrais Method*®, can sidestep complicated explanations that include several drawings of the larynx from three angles. The lessons in their book, *Singing With the Whole Self*, takes advantage of the work of Moshe Feldenkrais, who integrated rigorous scientific understanding with self-exploration. Through a series of lessons involving the entire body, from the feet to the top of the head, the authors enable us to do with the entire body what many pedagogues only ask us to do with our voice: discover the best relationship at any given moment between the many parts of ourselves, so that we can more effectively do what we want. When this type of work is truly understood and not merely glossed over or approximated, we may discover that, despite the skepticism of compelling luminaries such as Miller, anyone can become a singer.

Within the last twenty years, a number of resources have emerged which provide numerous means and perspectives, rather than advocating only one. Books such as *Bodymind and Voice* contain a wealth of information, historical, scientific and holistic, with which a teacher of singing can enrich his or her repertoire of ideas. Subjects such as the Alexander Technique and the ideas of Moshe Feldenkrais are found side by side with medical articles precise enough to be included in medical journals, and as much attention is given to the language of teaching as to the language of the subject to be taught. By seeing the art of singing as a lifelong endeavor which can evolve and encompass divergent viewpoints over the course of a career, teachers can avoid falling victim to a false choice. Keeping the agreed-upon aspects of the vocal sound in mind, teachers with the desire to go beyond their own self-perceived achievements can discover many paths to the mountain top. They may take any course they choose, keeping the stars above them always in sight.

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