

Vocal Wisdom
- maxims -
a seminar on the teachings of
Masters of the "bel canto" school of singing

Some thoughts:

A Maxim is a truth. One truth opens the door to all truth.

"Bel canto" - literal italian "beautiful singing" which are the proclaimed ideals of purity of vowels, flexibility and legato.

"These teachers (bel canto masters) made few rules, but insisted on obedience to natural laws, which are physical, not anatomical. The ear, not the muscles, guided both master and pupil..." Wm. Earl Brown

If the student asks, the answer is no.

Define the goal in singing: to create a stream of expression which is born of and captivates the soul, to find the love of self that permits love of others and of life, to discover the joy of giving of self that nourishes the soul.

Motivate the goal: to feel and live out the high and beautiful plane of consciousness which unites mind and body in song, and in giving a performance, to receive the return of energy and love from the souls of the listeners

Choose a path toward the goal: decision to be a "singer in training" for life, resolve to cultivate a beautiful art form, acceptance of the identity of a singer

Keep the goal out in front: priorities, a daily plan and a master plan, an unflinching sense of purpose, unconcerned about comparative competition, a race with oneself, measuring progress by then and now, not them and me, focused and forward moving.

Exercises: not the part for which we became singers, but the only way to excell. Make the exercises become elemental and fascinating to mind and body, like meditation.

Create a singing environment.

Never sing an indifferent tone. Never sing "by wrote." Never waste your time or the patience of your listeners by being uninvolved. Have the courage to lose yourself, but never relinquish control.

Three elements to all musical tones:

Attack - Sustain - Release

Three ideals of the bel canto singing tone:

Legato - Pure Vowels - Flexability

Group exercises:

Posture - Breath - Tone initiation - Sustain - Release

The singing cycle - continuous

Vowels - resonance colors and forms

Tuning the tone

Speech and Singing - What is the difference? What is the same?

Get in touch with the many ways we breathe:

Continuous, cyclical breathing - cooling the soup, blowing out a candle, sneezing, yawning, coughing, being cold, hot, out of breath, relaxed, sleeping, scared, relieved, sighing, surprised, gasping, lifting something heavy, defacating, giving birth, releasing...

Get in touch with the many ways we vocalize:

Speaking, humming, laughing, mumbling, shouting, giggling...

Two main reasons for Stage Fright:

Underprepared

Overprepared

Crowds are frightening when they are milling around in the reception area. Once they are seated and quiet, ready to listen, they are organized into one collective consciousness, your relationship to an audience is one on one. You can handle that.

If you know yourself, know your song, you can forget them both and be a performer, with trust and without trepidation.

Because your singing is a product of the imperical laws of physics, you cannot fail.

All thing being equal, the human singing voice fascinates more than any musical instrument.

If you express the music and the words, you will hold your audience.

Elizabeth Parcells

Learning at the Detroit Opera House

July 9 and 10, 1998

Syllabus

Voice Class at Schoolcraft College

Teacher – Elizabeth Parcells

Pianist – Gene Bossart (Larry Picard)

Notebooks, writing materials, and music paper

Books (Vocal Wisdom, exercise and technique books, pedagogy materials)

One Piano in the Forum, or in a large studio

Practice room availability for students between classes

Voice Class I – Elements - Beginners

A voice class for young or beginning singers, or for singers wishing to refresh their focus on the elements upon which the cultivation of the singing voice is built. The class will include a series of lectures (hopefully short) on these elements, as well as the development of a workbook of vocal exercises for daily practice. Students will learn how to create individual vocal training routines for their own voices, how to work autonomously and in the group to train and strengthen their voices, coordinate and utilize the breath, educate and tune their hearing, and build awareness of the nature of their singing.

Students participating will have three songs prepared, at least one of which is in Italian. No opera arias please. Students will sing for the class and receive instruction.

Voice Class II – Cultivation - Intermediate

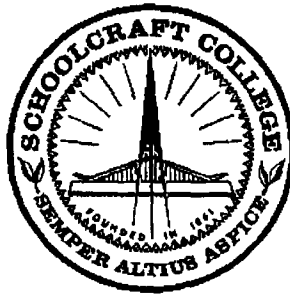
A voice class for singers of intermediate level or for singers wishing to refresh their understanding of the study and cultivation of the singing voice. The class will include a series of lectures (maybe not so short) on the study of language and literature for singing, of musical and vocal style and presentation, as well as a continuing discussion of singing techniques and vocal training. Students will learn how to make use of vocal techniques to meet the requirements of the music they are singing, to train and work with language and phonetics in their vocal exercises and repertoire, developing a workbook for individual study. They will build awareness of musical and vocal style and of expression in their singing.

Students participating will have three songs prepared, at least one of which is in a foreign language (preferably Italian, French or German), and may present selected opera arias which are appropriate to their level of ability. Students will sing for the class and receive instruction.

Voice Class III – Performance - Advanced

A voice class for singers preparing for a career in singing, or for advanced singers wishing to learn the art of performance before an audience. The class will include a series of lectures (very short indeed) on various performance practices, deportment, etiquette and stage presence. Students will present their repertoire to the class and will receive feedback and guidance on their performances. This class will be conducted in the “master class” format.

Singers participating will have eight pieces prepared from song, oratorio and operatic repertoire. They will submit usable English translations of their repertoire to print in a concert program. They will be prepared to perform this repertoire before the class as well as before an audience in proper performance attire at a public performance.



Schoolcraft College

Voice Class 2000

Elements in Singing

Essay by **Elizabeth Parcels**

With quotations from

“**Vocal Wisdom** – the Maxims of Giovanni Battista Lamperti”
Singing – the Mechanism and the Technic by William Vennard

Expression

Singing has had as many forms as there have been singers through the ages and all over the world. It is like a fingerprint, unique to each individual. Lamperti: “Each voice is a law unto itself.” Singing, like the smile, is a universal form of human expression. There is a theory that mankind began to sing before it learned to speak. If this is so, singing must be so elemental to our being and so imbedded in our culture that one could reasonably surmise that we must all be accomplished natural singers.

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Singing is the outward expression of our thoughts and desires. Lamperti: “Your art is the fulfillment of your elemental desire to sing.” It can be as spontaneous as a smile or as cultivated as an aria. The purpose is the same, to satisfy the compelling desire to express oneself.

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There is another important distinction to be made between those who sing and the singer; many people sing for their own enjoyment, but the singer edifies his audience, not just himself. The singer cultivates his art and masters his craft to make his singing appealing and expressive.

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1. **Pure Vowels** – The words of the poet are served by the music. The singer learns to form clear, beautiful vowel colors to express those words, not only for their linguistic meaning, but also for the aesthetic quality of the language itself, lending a variety of colors to the singing tones.
2. **Legato** – “the carrying of the voice or the imperceptible merging of one tone into the other. Between one tone and the next the breath may not be interrupted, but must be held as though the tones were one.” The smooth movement from one tone to the next, creating expressive phrasing and beautiful line.
3. **Flexibility** – The ability to sing a wide range of notes at any given speed, in any given dynamic, with a wide range of colors, on one breath.

These three ideals are the elements of classical singing technique, as we know it today. These are the techniques that singers train for years to master. The three ideals are attainable through one vital element: the *breath*. This element delivers energy, stability and movement to the singing tone. There is hardly a fault in singing that cannot be

blamed on poor management of the breath. The hallmark of great singing is awesome breath energy and control.

Beyond pure technical elements, great singing depends on the *artistic personality* of the singer, which develops through cultural influences and education. Lamperti: “Utilize your time studying piano, the theory of music, and reading at sight. Broaden your knowledge of literature, painting, etc. the ‘beaux arts.’ This increases your ‘desire’ for beauty, from which springs the instinct to sing.”

Nowhere in these ideals is the quality or quantity of physical “voice” mentioned.

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The *elements of expression* in singing then are

- vocal technique
- musical language
- artistic personality.

We can do little to change the nature of our voices, but we can accomplish much in mastering technique and developing an artistic personality. Those who feel that their natural voices are less than ideal can take heart. The voice, by itself, is not an element of expression. Despite all the modern debates about size and scope of voices, as if singers were merely walking amplifiers, one truth remains: A great performance is moving and memorable because it is *expressive*.

Lamperti: “The Soul of a Singer

The soul of a singer demands technique of both voice and breath before it will emerge as tone. Intense vibration and adequate energy must be ever available.
Overtones are its colors:
Rhythm is its heartbeat:
Resonance its body:

Vowels the forms it assumes:
Consonants are its hands:
Emotion is its lifeblood:
Imagination its ears and eyes:
Thought its feet:
Desire its wings:
Melody is its language.
The soul of a singer is the subconscious self.
It can use the body and mind only after these are disciplined by the
conscious self.”

A Brief Discussion of the Breath

Breath or *breath energy* is the most basic subject of study for the singer. The reason is that the singing tone is impossible without it. What modern person studies and exercises his breath today, besides the athlete and the singer? Most people are unaware of their breath or posture most of the time. Of course, they will never excel at singing. Many singers and teachers of singing neglect the breath in lessons and practice out of boredom with the subject or because of lack of understanding. It is the single most important element in the production of the singing tone.

Lamperti states: “A tone must be self-starting, self-prolonging and self-stopping.” To make this possible, complete management of breathing is an indispensable necessity. Generally, faulty singing is caused by awkward respiration. In fact, *all bad habits of the throat are merely efforts of protection against clumsy management of the breath.*

The exercise of the breath by itself seems a dry and useless activity for the singer that wishes to make sounds and not to merely draw air in and out. Therefore, it is wise to consider the exercise of the breath as part of every vocal exercise.

There are three types of breath or respiration in singing:

- Abdominal or Diaphragmatic (low)
- Lateral (middle)
- Intercostal or Clavicular (high)

The ideal method is considered to be the first one, abdominal. Nevertheless, it is a combination of these breath types that comes into play, depending on the demands of the music.

Establishing good posture is the first step toward educating the breath. An exercise to draw the singer up to full height and to open the ribcage allowing space for the abdominal muscles to move and work should begin the singer's exercise session. Consciousness and energy of breath will carry the voice over the initial tones in the exercises.

Abdominal (diaphragmatic) breathing should be the focus of attention in practicing the breath, since this type of low breath is rarely called upon in daily life. A singer needs to get in touch with his low breath. The athlete knows this type of breathing, because he will resort to it during phases of heavy exertion. The marathon runner knows it because it is the most efficient way to exchange the air in the lungs without undue effort during a long race. The singer prizes the low breath for the ability to inhale a large amount of air without effort in a short time.

The muscle responsible for the inhalation of air is the *diaphragm*. This muscle, shaped like an upside-down bowl and located horizontally between the upper and lower thorax (below the heart and lungs, but above the stomach and liver), is the strongest muscle in the body, next to the heart itself. When it contracts, it displaces the organs of the lower thorax, creating space in the upper thorax for the lungs to expand, drawing in air to fill that space. When the diaphragm releases, the lower thorax organs can return to their "at rest" positions, space in the upper thorax decreases, and the air in the lungs is exhaled. Normally, this cycle of inhalation and exhalation takes place throughout our days and nights without our giving it much attention

breathing rates. This is useful for the singer to understand, in not only building the strength and flexibility of the singing voice, but also for handling stressful situations such as the singing of demanding music or nerves and excess adrenalin during performance.

The singer breathes like a weightlifter; passive inhalation, active exhalation. The diaphragm is so adept and strong, it can manage inhalation without strain or effort. The active exhalation requires the muscles of the abdomen to contract, pushing the lower thorax upward and forcing the air to escape from the lungs quickly and forcefully. This blast of air can be turned into sound by allowing the vocal folds to be sucked together and vibrate. However, an uncontrolled blast leads to more of a shout or a grunt than a pleasing musical tone.

In this case, controlling the flow of air is imperative for the singer. The abdominal muscles can be trained to deliver the correct degree of contraction to move the air through the vocal cords at the correct rate. However, it is the counteraction of the diaphragm that is the key to breath control. Again, this fascinating muscle is capable of its task without much thought on the part of the singer. When the “abs” contract, the diaphragm reacts with contractions of its own to balance and counterbalance the abs, controlling the amount of air pressure brought to bear against the larynx. This means that the larynx is not forced to react with contractions of its own to inhibit the excess flow of air and the vocal cords can vibrate “freely.”

There are several points to keep in mind at all times when singing, whether during vocalizing or the singing of music:

- You must be conscious of your breathing at all times, monitoring your breath capacity and watching for opportunities to inhale additional air according to current needs, which can have changed with the situation
- The breath is in motion at all times, it never arrests during tones or between phrases, as in speech; the singing breath is always moving
- Your posture must never collapse or go lazy; never breathe or sing indifferently

- Breath energy gives the tone and the diction its energy, projecting your voice and words into the hall to your listeners; never allow your energy to flag
- Use economy and efficiency by gauging your situation and taking what you need, no less and no more. Run your race wisely.

A brief discussion of Singing Tone upon the Breath (Attack)

The tone itself begins in the larynx where the vocal cords or folds are located. As air is exhaled, the larynx takes up a position so that the folds can be drawn together by the flow of air and begin to vibrate. The effect that causes this was described by and is named for the physicist Bernoulli. This aerodynamic effect also describes the theory of lift and flight, explaining the motion of air molecules over and under a foil or an airplane wing.

To imagine how the Bernoulli effect causes the vocal cords to vibrate when air is passed between them (through the glottis which is the space between the vocal cords), visualize an American flag in a steady, stiff wind; drawn up and fluttering. This fluttering is much like the vibration of the vocal cords. Now visualize the flag in a gentle, fluctuating breeze; its motion is very different, it moves and waves, but there is no “vibration” along its edge. The flag is entirely passive, and therefore entirely dependent on the wind to make it move and flutter.

Think of your vocal cords the same way, as passive and reliant on the stream of (exhaled) air for their vibration as the linen flag upon the wind. This exhaled air is something you control. Your vocal tone is an effect which you control *indirectly* via the direct control of your breath.

So the initiation of singing tone upon the breath is possible by *aerodynamic* effect, without muscular effort in the throat, the way flight is possible upon the movement of air, without flapping the wings. Students of singing learn this concept so that they understand the importance of breath management for achieving free and “effortless” tone production.

A brief discussion of Formants and Vowels

Having drawn breath and initiated tone in the larynx, the next part of the singing tone equation is the formant or vowel. It is the shape of the vocal tract, that is the spaces around the vocal cords known as resonators, which determines the color of the tone.

Points to remember:

- any resonator is a secondary vibrator
- the vocal resonator is a column of air within a space or chamber, not a “sounding board”
- the shapes of the vocal resonators are complex and highly variable

These spaces include the pharynx, the nasal cavity, the mouth, and to some extent, the trachea. These spaces are resonating chambers. The mouth and pharynx can change shape, largely by movement of the tongue, lips and jaw, also by positioning the larynx. The nasal cavity and trachea have little capability for changing their shapes.

The resonators are capable of vibrating as a whole or in several ways at once in its parts. Most vibrators do this, creating *timbre*, which consists of several frequencies of different intensities sounding together. (Vennard)

With this diversity of colors available to the singer, it is hard to imagine why some singers choose to sing almost entirely on one vowel color, muddying their diction and making their singing monotonous. The problem may well lie in an insufficient breath and a throat fighting to compensate for this lack of breath energy. A tone that is well supplied with and supported by breath energy is capable of infinitely more nuance and expression.

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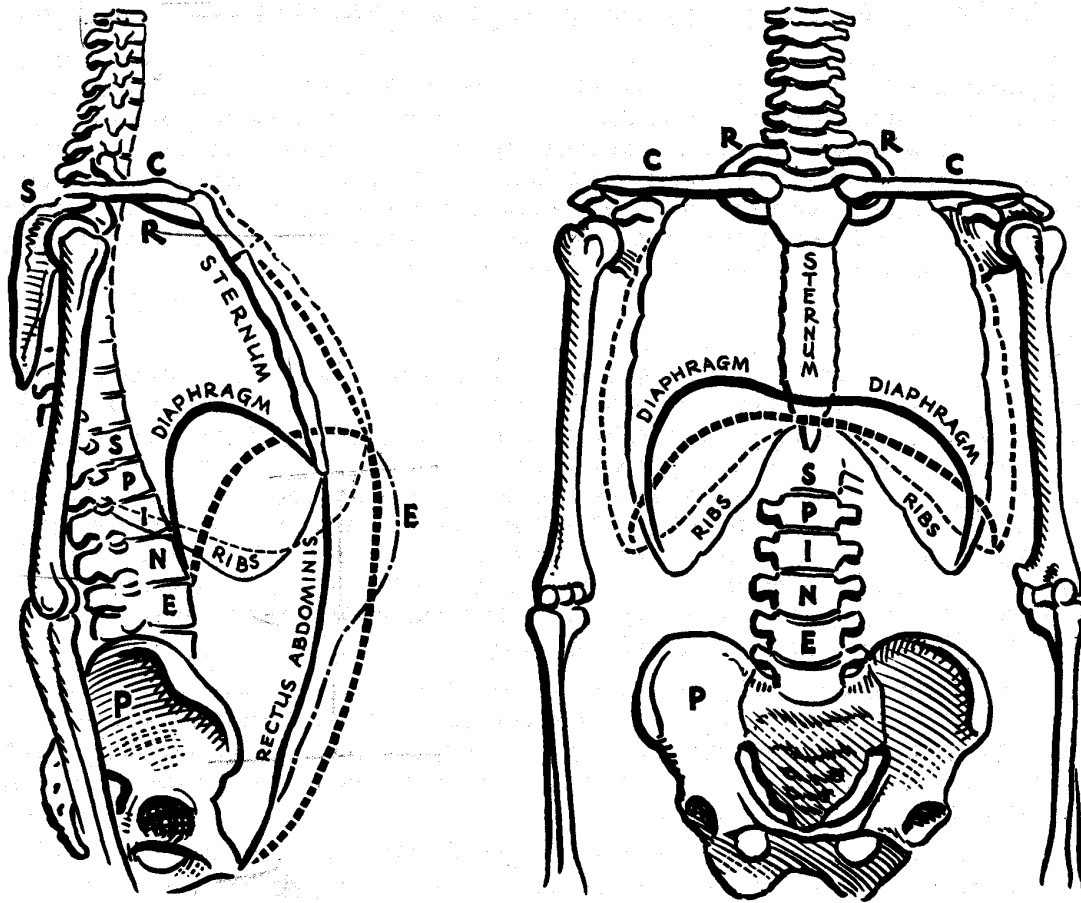
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Our breathing mechanism, largely the work of the diaphragm, is an interesting combination of voluntary and involuntary reflexes. The muscles of the limbs, for instance, are voluntary, answering the conscious commands of the brain. Activities such as digestion and heartbeat are involuntary, independent of the conscious brain. The breathing mechanism is both; involuntary during sleep or unconsciousness, voluntary at times when the conscious mind chooses to take control of it. You can hold your breath, but you cannot (or should not!) command your heart to cease beating.

Breathing, like heart action, is also influenced by subjective factors such as moods (fear, happiness, sadness) or levels of exertion (running, lifting, climbing, swimming).

Through control of the subjective mind, you can indirectly control your heart and

breathing rates. This is useful for the singer to understand, in not only building the strength and flexibility of the singing voice, but also for handling stressful situations such as the singing of demanding music or nerves and excess adrenalin during performance.

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With this diversity of colors available to the singer, it is hard to imagine why some singers choose to sing almost entirely on one vowel color, muddying their diction and making their singing monotonous. The problem may well lie in an insufficient breath and a throat fighting to compensate for this lack of breath energy. A tone that is well supplied with and supported by breath energy is capable of infinitely more nuance and expression.

The vowels pronounced in speech are formed by positioning the tongue and/or lips, the *formants*. These formants change the shape of the resonators of the voice, changing the

timbre of the singing tone. The pure “ah” (father) vowel is formed with the tongue in a moderately relaxed position and the lips moderately opened. The tongue rises to form “eh” (feather) and “ee” (feet) while leaving the jaw and lips in an open position. Likewise, from the pure “ah” vowel position, the lips close around the mouth to form the “aw” (awful), “oh” (nobody) and “oo” (soon) vowels.

The singer understands vowels to be colors of the singing tone, not just sounds in language. Vowels are a vital part of the singer’s vocal exercise routine, since vowels affect the placement and focus of the singing tone differently on given notes in the scale. The singer must utilize various vowels during vocalization in a methodical manner in order to exercise the singing voice on different vowels throughout the range. The value of this practice will be apparent in the clarity of the words sung in songs and arias. The clarity of the words is a vital element of expression in the art of singing.

This essay is a work in progress. I welcome comments and discussion from serious students of singing. Chapters will be added and existing ones expanded over time. Thank you for your attention.

EP