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A Philosophy of Singing

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Thirteenth Edition – January 29, 2001

Counterfeit Voices

In this very complex world, we have great demands for the new, the different, the unusual. Variety is the spice of life, and now we are in the midst of rampant variety. The voice is no exception. We are hearing all kinds of strange sounds these days. It seems whatever sells is the bottom line. No matter what the worth of the offering, we continue to be impressed if it has gotten enough PR in the press, and been advertised enough on our TV.

The newspaper advertisements for events simply print whatever they want you to believe—the greatest, the most awesome, the most spectacular—and we, if not discerning, tend to be taken in by all these press notices.

Voices are taking a beating.

Microphones have wrought great havoc in this respect. With this fake means of amplifying the human voice, our ears have become used to a different sound—a two dimensional flat sound as opposed to a holographic sound. The two dimensional sound lacks overtone and carrying power, and yet records very well. The true sound of the voice is harder to record because it has many overtones and disturbs the recording instruments.

This makes it more difficult for the recording technician to get a true setting for each voice. The true voice is a real pain for these technicians because it knocks all the needles on the machines off the dial. When nothing is coming out that carries, all is well. When nothing is disturbing the recording machine, that is because there is really nothing happening. Recording noise is easy. Recording a true sound is a tricky proposition.

With this in mind, one can see how you can “invent” a voice and make a recording with little or no problem.

Any problems this manufactured, or counterfeit, voice may encounter can be taken care of by these recording machines. An echo is usually added to enhance the sound, and all kinds of filters and different colors can be added to create this voice. Without the aid of these machines it is like pulling the curtain away from the wizard in the Wizard of Oz. If it weren't so widespread and widely accepted, most of these recordings would be a laughingstock. However, the reality is that

the public has accepted and embraced many recordings that are totally without merit. Why is this practice so widespread.

Much of this usage of a counterfeit voice developed because we have lost touch with the true sound. So many links to past greatness have been forgotten entirely, and we are left with the dregs—the counterfeiters—making a mockery of what great artistry and integrity in singing is all about. Many singers are coached to color the words. This leads to manipulation and dishonesty of the first order. The meaning of the sentence will color the words if properly produced *first* of all, and the meaning of the words properly understood *most* of all. The *color* of the voice is the most important element in singing. As stated many times before, without this individual and unique color in each human voice, there really is no singing going on. It is a fake. If the voice is not connected to the emotions, the singer must *make* it emotional, create a color, instead of *being* emotional and allowing the thought of the words color the voice.

Two students of mine were talking one day about the recent opera they had seen at the Met. They both concluded that the soprano was really singing well and overpowering the tenor. Her voice was clear and large and beautiful, and her singing more or less buried the tenor whenever they sang together. The much more experienced singer made the suggestion that they replace the soprano so the balance between the two singers would be better. I never know quite what to say when someone makes a comment like that—I guess I'm always so astonished that a professional singer would make such a statement that I pretend I don't hear it. All too often this seems to be the case—replace the really unique singer with one that matches all the others on the stage.

That way no one is individual or unique.

Uniqueness is a very frightening experience for most people. Singers, or artists of any kind, are unique simply because they were given a gift. This gift will only come to fruition in reality with the correct guidance. Pushing a Rolls Royce is not the same as learning how to drive a Rolls Royce. As we get older, it's simply too hard to push anymore, no matter how great the instrument might be. When we have created a false voice by pushing it does not last. In our disposable society, who cares? Being “different” does not necessarily mean being unique.

All those *pushers* may be different, but end up all sounding the same—saying nothing. *Being* your voice is what makes it unique, not doing something to make the voice work the way you want it to. The question is not what do you want, but rather, what do I need to do to get what I want. Again, getting what you want comes from being, not doing.

An article in the New York Times recently addressed the phenomenon of why we now have so many lyric mezzos presently having quite successful careers. The real truth of the matter is that at least half of them are sopranos—they just haven't learned to sing the high notes. The ear of the teacher is to blame for that, for most of these singers are extremely intelligent, musical, hard-working, talented people who are being misled. I used to think it was a plot on the part of the teacher to stop great singing from happening, but realize now it is simply a lack of expertise. No matter how great the personality of the instructor, if the information is too much, or not enough, all well-intentioned efforts to get the person to sing are futile. If the singer has his own “method” and is not interfered with, he/she might have a chance. Otherwise, we have a counterfeit voice.

The great singers kept on singing—they didn't stop to teach. Most of them never could explain what they were doing anyway, let alone lead someone down the correct path. Much blame must be placed on the agents who choose the singers, and the company that hires the singer. Why doesn't someone tell the singer the truth? We have a great variety of singers these days. The coloratura soprano, the lyric soprano, the spinto soprano, the dramatic soprano, the Verdian soprano, the Wagnerian soprano, the lyric mezzo, the mezzo-soprano, the dramatic mezzo, the contralto, the lyric tenor, the heldon tenor, the dramatic tenor, the counter tenor, the lyric baritone, the Verdian baritone, the bass baritone, the basso buffo, the Russian bass, etc., etc., etc. I'm sure there are many more, but I think you get the idea. In the past, if you looked on the resumes of some of the most famous singers at the time, you would see they sang everything and anything. With all these titles, it's no wonder no one knows who or what they are. When the "fach" system was invented in Germany we started to classify singers, and force them into a mold. This, of course, was done simply as a form of control, more than as an aid to the singer. It is interesting in talking to many of the singers who sang in Germany, once you signed a contract, somehow all these restrictions fell by the wayside. If they needed you to fill a role they suddenly disremembered their own restrictions. You either sang the role or lost your contract. So much for that brilliant idea. Rules are made to be broken, I guess. Used as a guideline for singers, it is a great help. Used as a rule, it prevents vocal growth.

Falsetto is another invention of our conscious mind. It is what it says it is, false. If you use it in your singing, you'd better learn how to get out of it, or else you'll eventually lose your placement and thus your voice. Again, on a microphone it's fine, but if you want a lasting career, crooning thusly takes its toll eventually. Mezzo-voce is another term highly bandied about. Everyone has an opinion on that one, and helps keep us in bewilderment from which many musicians never stray. They stay in a state of confusion about all these relatively unimportant terms, when the real answer lies in the unconscious, not the conscious. Even p and f—dynamics—are confusing to most singers. These are only emotional markings, given by the composer to convey a certain mood or thought. All the markings in music are invitations to suggest what the composer had in mind when he wrote it— not some kind of mechanical manipulation that conveys nothing truly emotional. I always wonder what most people think singing Wagner means to them. He was one of the most bel canto of composers. If you look at his scores, about every two to four measures there are p markings. Yet when I hear someone attacking this music, what kind of counterfeiting is going on? It doesn't resemble anything that's on the page of music, yet they merrily bellow away thinking this is singing Wagner. Remember, when Wagner wrote his music there were no "Wagnerian sopranos."

Another counterfeit idea of what the voice should sound like.

It is always interesting to me to hear an advertisement for "building a voice."

Sounds like the local lumber company would have the proper materials for that job—not the local Conservatory of Music. Another misnomer. This week I was chatting with one of my students, and he said that he thought of learning how to sing as cleaning the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. When the true colors Michelangelo painted there were revealed, many were shocked by the vibrancy and clearness of the colors. This can be said about the voice as well—many do not like the brightness and clarity. We have become accustomed to the veiled, dark color—but again

this is a counterfeit. When our true sound starts emerging, it is not what we expected at all. Rightly so. If that's what you thought it was, that's what you would have been doing. The counterfeit one is much easier to access, takes much more physical work, but results in less vocal clarity. Clarity is the word we want to remember. Eventually, too much work "dirties and dulls" the sound. But when the layers of grime and dirt are painstakingly removed, we again "see" the joy in which it was created—vibrant and full of living. Our energy becomes efficient, and the body was built to be efficient, not used or abused by the owner. Sometimes the singer gets so accustomed to the hard work and the abuse, it is very emotional for him/her to let go of these manipulations. In the voice, when the true brightness is revealed to us, the music suddenly takes on a life of its own. We must only be the vehicle through which it passes. If we dull the sound with any interference, we have not fulfilled our duty to the composer or to the art of singing.

Once a singer gets used to manipulating, thus creating a counterfeit voice, it takes a great deal of positive work to counteract the damage. If it has gone on for a long period of time, the process can be extremely frustrating. It takes a good deal of courage to take the risks that are involved in letting go. Yet, without taking these risks of letting go, there is no thrill in the voice. Singing 100% incorrectly is lauded and applauded. Singing 90% correct is totally unacceptable. 100% wrong is at least consistent. With everything being held in place there is certainly no doubt that it's consistent albeit boring and usually intellectual. This type of singing is now the accepted way. This false way of singing doesn't last, and if it manages to hang in there for years, there can be no growth of expression or emotion. This voice makes the same dull sound year after year. To the singer it must seem like washing and ironing clothes—all very sanitary and neat, but hardly exciting or elevating either to them or the audience. And yet many singers do hang in there for years, enjoying the intellectual work but never experiencing being alive. The music doesn't have a chance. No wonder most recitals are so poorly attended. It's cheaper to have a nap in the comfort of your own home.

One of the most detrimental things a singer is asked to do is change his voice for the music being sung. Some are even encouraged to have their lieder voice, their opera voice, their oratorio voice, and their Broadway voice. What's wrong with their own voice? If properly produced, the brain does all those changes within their own sound. If encouraged to keep changing that sound for the music being sung, the singer's brain shuts down, and the conscious mind is busy creating a counterfeit sound for each selection. Pretty soon the voice shuts down as well. Crossover singers have now come into vogue. After a while, some beautiful voices start crooning everything they sing. The counterfeit voice appeals to the ego because you think you can control your sound by manipulating it. Nothing could be further from the truth. You have the voice you have. This is all done to the singer in the name of the word "style."

Just because you sing something in a different style does not mean you change your voice. You simply must change the way you think about the piece. Unfortunately, one must be extremely advanced to pull this off. It's sort of fun to make different noises, but has nothing to do with correct singing. One of the great American sopranos was Eileen Farrell. This was a huge voice, lush and rich, and yet she was a regular with the Bach Oratorio Society. I heard her in concert with this group, and it was spectacular Bach singing—all in her own voice, and yet completely in the style Bach wrote. She was also a great pop singer. Manipulating the voice might be a wonderful intellectual pastime, but there is no limit to what you can do when you find your own

sound. You're home free! Many people will want to take you out of your true sound for many reasons. Their job is to get you to make a sound they want, but have no idea how to go about it. When we imitate the sound they want, they couldn't be happier. Your voice will suffer, however, because these manipulations close your throat and stop your air from moving. This is why it is so difficult to sing in a choir. Trying to blend sometimes takes us right out of our coordination, and yet, when we remember, the result will please both the singer and the conductor.

So, in conclusion, the goal is to find our voice and stick with it. After doing it for a period of time, you will not only feel the difference in yourself, but will start hearing other singers in a new way. It will change the way you perceive sound, and change the way you produce your own sound. Each voice has its own color, but all must have the upper overtone to project and be truly unique. This "squillo" is the secret to all great and long-lived singing. The phenomenon of acoustics is what makes voices have infinite variety and yet have a common component. Without this sound the throat is not open. When a group of singers sing this way, we have a blending of acoustics from each throat that sounds like one voice. Now the variety of sounds is limitless because it is coming from our thoughts, not our manipulations.

Dogs are Miracles with Paws. A dog's nose in the palm of your hand can cure almost anything. Dogs are made of love and fur. Let your dog take you for a walk. Dogs are a sure thing. Some little known dog secrets: dogs have no secrets. Dogs are like vanilla ice cream: reliably delicious. Dogs are wise agents directly from heaven. If you had a tail, wouldn't you wag it? There are no bad dogs. Be your dog's best friend. Dogs like dancing, drive-in movies and dreaming.

God made dogs and spelled his own name backwards! Dogs make great therapists. Kiss your dog all the time.

Some dogs are nap dogs. Dogs invented unconditional love. Dogs are party animals. Apply dog logic to life: eat well, be loved, get petted, sleep a lot, dream of a leash-free world. LIVE YOUR DOG'S LIFE."

SARK '91—dedicated to Punky - my first dog love. Given to Bubba by his dog-walker. I couldn't resist including this in this Newsletter. If we would only think of our voices in the same way, what a lot of progress we would make. Eat well, be loved, get petted, sleep a lot, dream of a leash-free voice. Love your unique sound.