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A Philosophy of Singing

Tom Schilling Vocalway Newsletter Issues

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A Complete Sound

“It is very important to understand what is a complete being and what is an incomplete being, because if this is not understood from the beginning it will be difficult to go further. Perhaps an example will help to illustrate what I mean. Let us compare a horse-carriage with an aeroplane. An aeroplane has many possibilities that an ordinary carriage does not have, but at the same time an aeroplane can be used as an ordinary carriage. It would be very clumsy and inconvenient and very expensive, but you can attach two horses to it and travel in an aeroplane by road. Suppose the man who has this aeroplane does not know that it has an engine and can move

by itself and suppose he learns about the engine—then he can dispense with the horses and use it as a motorcar. But it will still be too clumsy. Suppose the man studies this machine and discovers that it can fly. Certainly it will have many advantages which he missed when he used the aeroplane as a carriage. This is what we are doing with ourselves; we use ourselves as a carriage, when we could fly. But examples are one thing and facts are another. There is no need of allegories and analogies, for we can speak about actual facts if we begin to study consciousness in the right way.

Let us return for a moment to the analogy of an aeroplane, what is the reason why our aeroplane cannot fly? Naturally the first reason is because we do not know the machine, how to work it and how to put it in motion. And the second reason is that as a result of this ignorance the machine works at a very slow speed. The effect of this slow speed is much greater than if we compare a horse-carriage and an aeroplane.”

From “The Fourth Way”—P. D. Ouspensk

It is also very important for us to understand what is a complete sound and what is an incomplete sound. A complete sound is one that truly flies. It has no boundaries. A sound that is being pulled along by outer muscular effort is very common today. The exterior muscles of the body contract and force air up into the throat to produce a sound. As in the case of the airplane, this method is clumsy, inconvenient, and the expense to the vocal mechanism is in the long term devastating. When we encounter any method of sound production, the first thing to observe is whether the singer is relaxed, or is he/she working hard for the results. We can be greatly fooled by all the effort they are making, thinking this is an emotional outburst. However, when we harness the body and use it like a pair of horses, the sound produced is wooden and actually brutal—not only to our ears, but to the singer’s instrument. With age and misuse, the deterioration of the sound is

signaling the deterioration of the vocal mechanism. Our bodies can work like horses for only so long. Then the time of slow speed starts as the cords are not able to take the abuse, and a tremelo starts. Finally a wobble is the result. Now the vocal mechanism is working at a very slow speed because of the effort involved and the resistance with which we block our own energy.

In a few cases the “team of horses” method of voice production seems not to bother the singer. There have been major careers based on this violent method. Many of them have been relatively short-lived but spectacular careers, leaving behind a legacy of recordings which are held in great esteem and considered definitive of the role being sung. These spectacular singers could have sung into their 60’s because the talent was so great, but because of their willful, impetuous singing, only lasted until their middle 40’s. We are robbed of first the glorious talent, then the possibility of hearing them when they should have been in their hey-day—fully mature, fully confident, and truly vocally flying in that special place which elevates us and sends positive vibrations to the whole Universe. It also marks the end of a career that could have, and should have lasted another ten or perhaps twenty years. Performing today is a small handful of magnificent talents who have defied all the rules and still electrify us with their formidable performances. This talent, however, never got off the ground—never had the privilege of flying—and therefore remain efficient and work-a-day. At present, success does not necessarily mean you have any talent, but the singers mentioned above certainly did. They were given so much talent that they never went into themselves and fulfilled their greatest potential—yet the world, and rightly so, acknowledged their extraordinary gifts. They just did not go down in history as one of the singing greats.

What we have to be careful of is blindly adulating a great singer because “everybody” says they were great. We must learn to be astute critics based on actual facts, using our consciousness in the right way. Each singer who has gained fame has done so for a good reason. They may have been a great actor, a great showman, a great interpreter, a great vocalist—but the question we are addressing is—*did the voice fly?* Were they really a great artist? Or did we just forget about that part of it and watch them sing, if a video, or hear them sing on records? Did we really listen? We are in such a visual age that often we are so intent on watching that we forget to listen. Singing is first and foremost an aural art. We must keep reminding ourselves of that fact constantly, or we will mistake what we saw for what we actually heard. And if we are listening, can we tell the difference between a great singer and a good singer with enormous talent? Records can now be “doctored up” to sound completely different than the voice sounds in an auditorium. We must lift our consciousness to a new level and become aware, because “if this is not understood from the beginning it will be difficult to go further.”

While I was writing this newsletter, the March 6th, 2000 copy of New York magazine arrived. I was curious to read the review of “The Merry Widow” which the Metropolitan Opera produced for the first time on its stage. After telling us the story, the reviewer, John Simon, commented on the work of the singers:

“To make this fly, the leads should look like the cover of the Met’s program; a dapper, moustachioed swain waltzing around a willowy belle, rapturously bent back over his arm. Instead, we get the patriarchal, parallelepipedal Placido Domingo, staid verging on stodgy. Frederica von Stade, though not correspondingly matronly, does not bend much either, literally

or histrionically. She comes across foursquarely American, nice but goody-goody, delivering her spoken lines in an almost arthritic manner.

The stars still sing out fully enough for the work's less-than-overwhelming requirements, but their voices lack a certain luster—that frothy, insinuating filigree that cajoles its way into our ears. The secondary lovers, Paul Groves and Emily Pulley, please in all departments—she even manages a cartwheel in the cancan scene— but no one here will go down in operetta history.”

That he used the words “to make this fly” almost knocked me over. Whatever we may think of the artist's appearance, or whatever criticism we may have of their stage department, the thing that struck me most was the comment, “their voices lack a certain luster.” Maybe indeed the work itself could not fly with these stars as leads, but their voices should have. We must become conscious of the complete sound, and not simply sit back and think we are hearing what is not there. Worse yet is not to notice just because they are famous. We deserve to hear the best, and we must wake from our sleep-state and actually become aware when it isn't happening. No amount of stars, costumes, staging, or sets can take the place of this complete sound in the human voice. They were not using the horse-carriage method, but the motor car method. Singing with no luster in the voice—no flying—is just as bad as singing with too much voice. To fly, we must find a deeper inner mechanism.

The second use of the airplane is to use it as a carriage, or motor car, and drive around the countryside rather clumsily, but under our own power. As opposed to the horse-carriage, at least we are using our own inner engine to some degree, but we haven't discovered we can really fly. In many cases the possibility never enters our minds. We are never introduced to such information. I used to think there was a conspiracy to not let a student know that this is a very attainable reality. Now I have discovered that it is not a conspiracy at all, but a lack of awareness on the part of the instructor, be it a teacher, a coach, or worse yet, your own ear. Even more devastating to me was the fact that so many of our most famous singers didn't fly either. It is very rarified air.

In this new millennium so much positive energy is available for us. This is the new Way we are heading. The old Way of doing things is over because it doesn't work anymore. We are compelled to move into the future.

We must delve deeper into ourselves and find the way to the mechanism that controls our ability to fly. This is a time for planning our future now—making adjustments as we go. The times are changing so fast that we have no security in the now because the now has changed before we have time to understand what is happening. The possibilities for growth and achievement are unlimited as we enter this new time period. But it will only happen when we make the decision to become truly awake and move ahead to our goal. Otherwise we stay grounded in our old lethargic sleep-state, and never wake up.

If we never dig deep enough within ourselves we will never fly. But our mind must accept the fact that we can, and not satisfy itself with simply accepting the information that all we need to do is drive around in our carriage and be blissfully satisfied with ourselves. Flying means leaving behind all the excess baggage we have accumulated over the years. We have to unload a great

deal of baggage before the airplane will take off. Negative thoughts are very heavy and ground us more and more through life. *As you live is how you sing.* If we live with so much mental baggage, chances are there is much mental baggage around singing. The two are inseparable. The voice will never get off the ground until we do a thorough housecleaning of these thoughts. The Law of the Vacuum is the order of the day. Do something symbolic each day; clean a desk drawer of its clutter, put a closet in order and throw out any extraneous items, throw away clothes you haven't worn for a year. Many times things you throw away will have an emotional charge around them, and you not only get rid of the clutter but the emotional charge as well. Many thoughts about singing have a definite emotional charge on them, and we must be willing to let go of them if we want to succeed. If you do not let go of old thoughts, the new ones have no way of entering your consciousness. Be willing to accept the fact that you *can* fly, and make the commitment to do just that.

On this path to ridding ourselves of old belongings and old thoughts, one must be prepared to rid ourselves of other attachments. Sometimes our whole world of friends comes into question. A lot of friends are threatened when you choose to fly. Even our most trusted advisors or teachers are threatened. Whenever we make a change, there will be those well-meaning friends who will defy you to see your commitment through. They must be willing to accept this change in you, or else you must be prepared to go your own way. Unfortunately, we cannot have it both ways. Change is not fun for most of us, and yet it is the only way to freedom. Find your individuality. Cease being a motor car and driving along laden down with all your baggage. Choose to fly! You'll be amazed to discover how many others are on this path, and you are just waking up to this fact. When your inner world opens, you radiate a whole new energy to which others gravitate. With this expanded consciousness comes rewards you could only dream about. You'll gather around you friends who understand where you came from, and rejoice in where you're going. Now your new thoughts can create a whole new reality, not only in your singing, but in your life as well. We truly have the power to fly. It takes time, but what else have you got to do? Choose the future—your future.

P.S

As purists, we could get critical about the fact that the Met would even stage a "Merry Widow." It was a shock when New York City Opera staged "Sweeney Todd" some years ago. Again, by chance, my March 6, 2000 copy of "The New Yorker" happened to have an advertisement for "Sweeney Todd" to be performed in concert version by the New York Philharmonic starring Patti LuPone and Bryn Terfel in the lead roles. The concert tickets are \$75, \$100, \$125, \$150, \$200, and \$250. Tickets available at {212} 721-6500 {May 5th and 6th.} Gala tickets are available for the May 4 concert: \$1000, \$1500, and \$2500 at {212} 875-5757, in case you were interested. {The gala tickets include a pre-concert reception and a post-concert dinner with the artists.} The times they are a-changin'.