

Vocalway.com

A Philosophy of Singing

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Reinventing Yourself or Becoming Yourself

In this new age of technology, where machines are quietly, but surely, replacing our usefulness as human beings, there is a frantic search for identity. The musical world is no different. Broadway has become a poor man's version of opera. Opera has become a rich man's version of Broadway. Neither has benefited from this new development. On Broadway, most of the shows are revivals—with one distinct difference from the originals. They don't have singers who can sing the roles without a microphone. At the Met, thirty short years ago there were 4 or 5 sopranos who could be called on at the last minute to sing a definitive "Tosca." Now we're lucky to have one who can get through it admirably, let alone give it a first-rate performance. When the singing has lost its uniqueness, it means the performer has no longer learned his/her craft. When the singer is honest enough with him/herself to face this fact, it is time for action. Ah, yes. I'll "reinvent" myself. I'll start searching for a teacher who agrees with my way of thinking, and become the singer I always wanted to be. I'll audition the teacher. "Reinventing" one's self is the work of our conscious mind. If the "new" information we receive from a mentor conforms with our old way of doing things, we believe we are on the right track. Here is the "intellectual" way to begin again.

"Men of learning are those who have done their reading in the pages of a book. Thinkers and men of genius are those who have gone straight to the book of Nature; it is they who have enlightened the world and carried humanity further on its way.

If a man's thoughts are to have truth and life in them, they must, after all, be his own fundamental thoughts; for these are the only ones that he can fully and wholly understand. To read another's thoughts is like taking the leavings of a meal to which we have not been invited, or putting on the clothes which some unknown visitor has laid aside."

The Essential Schopenhauer

Unwin Books Barnes and Noble

If the information we are getting, either verbally or on the printed page, does not go directly to the book of Nature, it will not get us where we want to go. When we know a change is due, and we decide to do the groundwork to make it happen, the first step we usually take is to gather as much information as we can. We go to the library or the bookstore. There we know we will find the information we need to start getting us on our "new" way. Friends also start giving us information on singing, and pretty soon we have a multitude of ideas swimming around in our

heads. On a given subject do they all agree? Of course not. Each man has his own ideas. Now our work is cut out for us. How do we differentiate the differences on the printed page?

In singing, there are many, many books written by known and unknown “authorities” on the art of “How to Sing.” As the singer slogs through the thousands of diagrams of the vocal cords {open *and* closed}, and the larynx and the pharynx and the intercostals, etc., etc., etc., the path looks longer and more rocky than one ever imagined. As the words become more and more complex, the mind begins to get overloaded. When the books disagree, the truth is buried in so much lawyer language we can’t even decipher the difference.

However, all this aside, we have learned a lot of technical terms, and soon have put some kind of puzzle together for ourselves. If you have studied in the past, and are still studying, we go for the information that we are familiar with. Anything that disagrees with the information we have accumulated to date is dismissed, and we insist on persevering in this direction if the books and our teacher agree. Unfortunately, unless this information is challenged, it begins to stagnate. Learning never stops. If we believe there is an intellectual answer to singing, we are in for a big letdown. Experience is the bottom line. Books can only guide—not solve problems. Words, spoken or on the printed page, can only lead us down a certain path. Without the experience they mean nothing.

Another way to reinvent one’s self is to intellectually make the decision that if we have no high notes, then we must be a lower voice. The teacher is usually the one to help you make that decision. In the New York Times, one Sunday’s “Arts and Leisure” section dealt with the subject, “Why do we have so many lyric mezzos?” The answer is simple—over half of them are really sopranos with no high notes. Somehow, the voice was so good, that even singing the wrong vocal repertoire allowed them to have a career—no matter how long it lasts. Who cares? “I’ve sung at the Met!” Their vocal category was an intellectual decision. Again, we are looking for identity. Instead of allowing the voice to reveal itself, the conscious mind dictated. The correct sound will reveal the correct vocal category if we do not interfere. Then we can become the voice we truly are. Labels are a product of our own deep-seated need to find an identity, true or not.

If vocally things are not going well, another path is to become a singing actress! This is Oh, so inviting to the singer! If we can’t kill ‘em with our voice, then we’ll kill ‘em with our “echting.” Our ego just about can’t contain itself. We can spill all our emotions out to the audience and become the next big superstar! We’re all looking for a Titanic experience—however, this is one of the best ways to sink the ship! Watching someone on stage in a fit of crying or a burst of anger is not an artist of any kind; they are simply self-indulgent. If it weren’t so pitiful to watch, it would almost be funny. Ultimately, the effort to do this sort of thing wears the singer down.

These singers “reinvent” the role to suit their own personalities. Their monumental ego is a thing to behold. As a listener, the heightened intensity of their senses can obliterate the fact that they aren’t even singing. They have reinvented themselves into a caricature of an opera singer without even being aware of it. This sort of singing has a huge following these days, especially from all the people who watch the sordid talk shows on TV where the guests bare their most distasteful and disgusting lifestyles. The audience, as voyeurs, watches in amazement and amusement, and

have little awareness that they are watching “The Emperor’s New Clothes” instead. Singing’s job is to elevate us with the music, not bring us down into the gutter by self-indulgent emoting. We have enough outlets for that these days. Most critics these days don’t catch the difference. Fortunately there are some who do.

The third favorite way to “reinvent” yourself as a singer, is to go physical. This is big! If we learned to sing intellectually, we usually can’t be heard past the sixth row. Solution. Reinvent yourself as a “physical” singer. Go to the gym and work out! Tighten those stomach muscles! Lift those weights and tighten that jaw! Now you can blow that audience away with your voice! {Well, at least it sounds big to you!} Finally I am getting in touch with my body, and I’m using all those muscles to project my voice! I am really working hard, so it must be correct! A client of mine told me the beginning of the end for her was when she started working with a new teacher who said to her, “Your voice is like a sapling. Now we’re going to make it into a great oak!” Just this suggestion was enough to get her on the wrong track.

As our society becomes more physically oriented, we are more and more unaware of the driven sound as opposed to the projecting sound. The latter has a warmth of tone, a color, and a projection that a physical singer misses altogether. I was reminded of this in watching tennis at the U.S. Open this past week. The “old pros” who are the commentators for the TV coverage of the matches, if one listens carefully, use a number of terms about the action on the court. Phrases like, “must keep driving the ball”, and “extremely strong player” are used for some players, while “perfect placement”, and “very, very fit” are used for others. If you’ll notice, the former fits in with the conscious mind’s idea of what a player does and is, while the latter describes the result of the work of a great player. One is manufactured, and the other a result of coordination—the same as singing. One a “banger.” The other an artist. Youthful banging can overwhelm a greater player. Welcome to the world of the future.

How did we get to this place? Technology! Why should a tennis player learn to perfect the art of the game when their racquets pound the ball past their opponents for a winner? It is not their fault. They need go no further because it is winning for them. In singing, why learn to project when the engineer turns the dials up and down to do the job? This is how we are being denied the connection to ourselves that is so missing these days. By embracing faster and faster racquets, and more sophisticated microphones and body mikes, we are becoming a pawn in the hands of these outer, man-made physical objects.

“The ocean of man-made physical objects that surrounds us is set within a larger ocean of natural objects. But increasingly, it is the technologically produced environment that matters for the individual. The texture of plastic or concrete, the iridescent glisten of an automobile under streetlight, the staggering vision of a cityscape seen from the window of a jet—these are the intimate realities of his existence. Man-made things enter into and color his consciousness. Their number is expanding with explosive force, both absolutely and relative to the natural environment. This will be even more true in super-industrial society than it is today.

Anti-materialists tend to deride the importance of “things.” Yet things are highly significant, not merely because of their functional utility, but also because of their psychological impact. We

develop relationships with things. Things affect a role in the structure of situations and the foreshortening of our relationships with things accelerates the pace of life.

Moreover, our attitudes toward things reflect basic value judgments. Nothing could be more dramatic than the difference between the new breed of little girls who cheerfully turn in their Barbies for the new improved model and those who, like their mothers and grandmothers, before them, clutch lingeringly and lovingly to the same doll until it disintegrates from sheer age. In this difference lies the contrast between past and future, between societies based on permanence, and the new, fast-forming society based on transience.”

“Future Shock”

Alvin Toffler

This book was published in 1970. By 2001, we have arrived! We are now in this technological overabundance, giving us false energy which our egos take credit for. These man-made objects give us a security that does not require us to go deeply into our inner world where the real answers lie. Unfortunately, it has invaded our whole society, as predicted.

Vocalway is attempting to urge students to go back to Nature for the answers. This is where each person’s genius lies, and is the one that must be tapped to become yourself. If by reading someone else’s thoughts one thinks he/she can arrive at truth is deceiving one’s self. Emotional histrionics may fool some of the people for a while, but greatness never appears. Defying the microphone by shoving and pushing the voice also ultimately gets you nowhere either. By reinventing yourself by any of these methods is a path that leads to success maybe, but one never becomes fulfilled. Unless one intellectually, emotionally, and physically returns to the common sense coordination of these three, the sound is always flawed.

The comment that greets most students who go the natural direction is that this is the “old-fashioned” way to sing. Our technology has helped warp our way of hearing and experiencing. If the results of the new technology were grounding us, there would be no need to insist on this method of doing things. No one wants to be the dinosaur of their craft, but we are accelerating so fast that it has *changed* our basic value judgments. It has twisted our thinking somehow, and we are left with this crazy energy flying all around us. Why is it spinning around?

Because we have accelerated so quickly, we now have to find more things to divert us and keep us in our spin. We turn to novelty. This keeps us always looking for more and more to entertain us. Singers have to “think up” some new kind of sound to be unique. They reinvent themselves out of their own uniqueness. Result: no connection. We have moved into very bizarre programming on TV, and videotapes have gone over the top—showing everything you might have thought of, and then they come up with things you never could have thought of. There is one problem with all this.

“If you overload an environment with novelty, you get the equivalent of anxiety neurotics—people who have their systems continually flooded with adrenalin, continual heart pumping, cold hands, increased muscle tone and tremors—all the usual OR characteristics.

The orientation response is no accident. It is nature's gift to man, one of his key adaptive mechanisms. The OR has the effect of sensitizing him to take in more information—to see or hear better, for instance. It readies his muscles for sudden exertion, if necessary. In short, it prepares him for fight or flight. Yet each OR, as Lubin underscores, takes its toll in wear and tear on the body, for it takes energy to sustain it.”

“Future Shock”

Alvin Toffler

This OR phenomenon also happens when new information on singing is introduced to the student. When first told the throat is in the back of the neck, not the front, this response can happen. However, since this leads to connection to the breath in the body, it relieves our anxiety, and actually totally relaxes us into our inner power. We begin to “see” how to solve our own problems. The light bulb goes off in our head. This is the path we must take. If not being led to getting connected, however, the body remains in this agitated state. It probably is the reason drugs are so popular—too much novelty with no connection.

In summing up, go back to Nature and get connected to your true voice. If things are not explained to you properly, ask! The mind can take novel ideas if there is common sense connected to it. Although the result may not be immediate, the process will lead you very quickly into the correct coordination. Any time you feel you have to “do” something to produce your voice, you are reinventing. When you step out of the way and let your common sense dictate rather than your conscious mind, you are on your way to freedom. Become – don't reinvent.