

Practices: A Closer Look

Relaxation and Energy

Relaxation is fundamental to this work, because so many people are restricted in their movement and in their respiratory function by excess tension. Relaxation, however, is only a point of departure. As the process of relaxing becomes deeper and more differentiated, we discover that the release of tension is actually the release of *energy*, and it changes not only the *condition* of muscles but also the way they *function*. When we continue to follow the thread of unraveling tension, new functional possibilities emerge that no amount of mental knowledge could have enabled us to imagine in advance. If we allow these new possibilities of movement, response, and energy flow to unfold freely within the form of music, a kind of “technique” evolves that is so unmanipulated, unconstrained, and unselfconscious, that any understanding of technique as a system of willful controls seems suffocating by comparison.

Support?

The word *support* (*Stütze* in German) contains only half the meaning of the Italian word *appoggio* of which it is a translation. *Appoggio* means both *supporting* and *leaning*. In the context of singing, it conveys the idea that the breath leans on the diaphragm.

“Support” is widely held to be absolutely essential to an effective technique of singing, but there is an extraordinary amount of disagreement about what it actually is. In general, it is conceived of as the deliberate bracing of various muscles, intercostal, abdominal, etc.

In the approach developed by Lajos Szamosi, on the other hand, “support” is understood to be the unhindered vitality of the primary breathing muscle - the diaphragm itself. If the diaphragm is free to move, it is capable of an infinite variety of musical inflections, from the most delicate subtlety to the greatest intensity and power. The concept of “support” as the holding or tensing of other muscles in the body actually impedes this very thing by creating wrong tension. If singers give up “supporting”, they can begin to experience an entirely different quality of breathing and of singing. True support, true *appoggio*, is a much deeper, more alive and more effective interaction between the diaphragm and the vocal cords.

Control?

Control is something that is universally desired but cannot be aimed at directly. It might be better to speak of mastery rather than of control, which often implies rigidity, or suppression of energy, or deliberate manipulation. Mastery of a craft should mean confidence, flexibility, range, ease, freedom within the discipline of an exacting form. Mastery in this sense is not achieved by suppressing and “controlling” problems, but by perceiving their source and finding ways of helping them unravel until they are *resolved*.

One manifestation of wrong control is the tendency of singers to listen to themselves, to make sure they sound good. This is both futile -- since it is acoustically impossible to know from inside how we really sound to other people – and inhibiting. Often, giving up this one thing leads instantly to greater spontaneity, and to a deeper beauty and expressiveness. Instead of being guided by the sound as heard from inside, the singer should be guided most of all by her imagination of the music, and by her developing sense -- kinesthetic and intuitive -- for what constitutes greater physical and musical freedom.

Minimal Air

Many systems of vocal training advocate taking in a lot of air, getting “a good breath”, and then, by holding the ribcage in the expanded position of inspiration (a form of support), controlling the rate at which the air flows out during singing. This is considered to give the voice greater power or stability, and also to ensure that the singer will have a long enough breath for singing longer phrases.

In contrast, one of Lajos Szamosi’s central ideas was inspired by the famous singing teacher of the 1920’s, Paul Bruns (*Minimalluft und Stütze*, “Minimal Air and Support” among others). Bruns maintained that the combination of ease, spontaneity and power for which the Italians were renowned for centuries cannot be achieved by pumping the lungs full. Learning to use the “reserve” air, the air that remains in the lungs *after* a normal exhalation, gives the singer an extended range of breath, without the tension that comes from taking in a lot of air and sparingly letting it out.

Exercises

Many exercises consist of simple tonal patterns sung to a variety of syllables. They are often intended to stimulate release of tension so that the body can find a freer vocal function. In this case, it is usually helpful to sing the exercises playfully, with nonchalance, instead of working hard to perfect the way they *sound*. Other exercises are intended to stimulate or provoke certain muscles to a deeper response, and still others serve to inhibit misplaced or excessive effort.

There is no attempt to practice a correct posture in this process, because there is no one correct posture or position in singing. The moment a singer tries to set any part of the body (shoulders, larynx, etc.) in a certain way, spontaneity, freedom and grace are lost. The issue is not position but freedom of movement, in and through any number of positions.

In this work, there are no breathing exercises other than the “exercise” inherent in singing musical phrases, pieces and patterns. Breathing exercises that involve deliberate control of the breath cannot help to restore our breathing to its natural spontaneity and freedom. Every person has an instinct, deep in the body, for optimal breathing and for free singing, even if this instinct is submerged and inactive. The teacher's role is to help students release constraining habits so that they can discover what the body already knows. A calm, receptive attitude on the teacher's part, combined with a clear vision of the vocal and musical goals, can go a long way toward gently but insistently encouraging this kind of development.

Informed Touch

Informed touch is one way of helping students to release patterns of tension. One advantage of this kind of intervention is that it has a direct effect on the body with or without conscious effort on the student's part. It is often not possible for the singer *consciously* to will a change in the subtle, diverse and deeply interior processes of singing, and trying to do so can sometimes lead to greater constraint or confusion. In response to informed, intelligent touch, the body itself seeks out the path of least resistance and finds a more economical way of functioning. As the tensions fall away, the breath moves into freer patterns, like water flowing into newly accessible spaces.

Description or Prescription?

In the era of their supremacy in the vocal arts, the Italians recorded many observations about what happened in the body, or what singers experienced when they were singing well. Since that time, beginning with the work of Manuel Garcia in the 19th century, much more information has been gathered about the physiology of singing. Many approaches now base their instruction and imagery on this knowledge by transforming the *description* of what *happens* in good singing into a *prescription* for what the singer should *do*. For example, when an accomplished singer sings, the soft palate lifts; therefore, many teachers will encourage students to *lift* the soft palate.

It is true that when a person sings well, the soft palate lifts, but lifting it deliberately is putting the cart before the horse. If the neck, jaw, shoulders, etc. are tight, the soft palate will also be tight, and unable to lift naturally. Efforts to make it lift under these conditions increase tension and can at best effect a rough approximation of the nuanced responses that this muscle is potentially capable of. If the tension in the neck, etc. releases, the soft palate lifts *reflexively*, in response to the singer's musical imagination and intention to sing.

Perception or Prescription?

Centuries ago, the Italian singing masters described images that sometimes suggested themselves to singers when they were singing well. For example, singers might sense the flow of their breath as if it were a slender fountain of water, with a ping pong ball balancing on top of the stream.

When an organic process of change is given free reign in the singing lesson, such an image will sometimes occur spontaneously to the student. In this case, the image is a messenger from the student's own subconscious kinesthetic or proprioceptive sense, a direct perception of a functional shift. Prescribing the identical image in advance of the experience cannot effect the same shift.

To the extent that teachers do actively suggest images in this process, they are not using them as prescriptive metaphors for "the correct thing". In general, they would use them to encourage release of constricting habits. The more non-directive an image is, the more room it leaves for the subjectivity of the student and for unexpected, serendipitous effects, the deeper its influence is likely to be.

Prescribing feelings, even more than images, is impossible. Asking people to "try to feel" something cannot lead them to the true feeling and may well increase constraint. On the other hand, asking students what they *spontaneously* feel or notice is very helpful. It helps teachers to understand what their students are experiencing and how they are evaluating their experience, and it helps the students to become aware of themselves, their feelings and their functioning, so that they can increasingly be their own guide.

Choice of Musical Material

A large part of most lessons is spent working with phrases taken straight from the repertoire. The first phrase of an Italian aria can be sung through a whole series of keys, proceeding up (or sometimes down) by half steps, while the student focuses, for example, on not gripping with the neck or jaw, not tightening the abdominal muscles, not holding back the breath.

There are no scales or arpeggios in these lessons, because the difficulties they present can actually increase tension in anyone who has not already achieved some degree of ease or mastery. Even for a person who sings freely, the usefulness of scales and arpeggios is limited, because they are too difficult to be used for warming up, and too sterile to be good material for working on musical or technical craft. By sterile we mean that in themselves they are only formulae without expressive content, and therefore they cannot address the problems that music presents to a singer. An arpeggio in isolation is a completely different matter from one that appears in the context of a musical composition. In music, the arpeggio is imbued with meaning and emotion, and the singer is moved by that. Whether this effect is subtle or strong, it profoundly affects all the tiny, delicate processes in the body, and therefore all the technical issues in singing. Technical issues are inseparable from emotional ones in music, and it is within the experience of music that they have to be addressed.