

Singing Words.

In some traditional quarters cut off from current pedagogic thought, there remains a prevalent assumption that singers are incapable of understanding the components of voice production. The teacher's job then becomes a mystical search to describe those functions. What are the "practical ways" the questioner raises? "Frontal placement," "billowing, rosy clouds," "bubbling fountains," "the mask," "up-and-over," "projection," "head voice," or other imprecise terminology.
2004: Richard Miller "Solutions for Singers" p73

Further, explicit directions are given for the action and control of everything involved in making tone except the mind of the student. The larynx seems to be particularly vulnerable and is subject to continuous attack.

1917: David Alva Clippinger. "The Head Voice and Other Problems." iBooks. <https://itun.es/gb/c7GDE.1>

The quotes above hint at a debate that has been vigorous for many years. It has been framed as a clash between science and art, imagination and anatomy, metaphor and clarity. The debate exists not just between proponents of different approaches to vocal pedagogy: it can exist in the mind of an individual singer, or teacher of singing, during the course of a life, a lesson or a song. The debate is about language: what kind of language should the singing teacher deploy? How should we think about singing? What kind of language is most effective in promoting positive change?

I don't have the answer, nor do I take a side. In fact, I don't think one is right and the other wrong. Whatever helps, is right. What the debate seems to be about though, is words and thoughts. The words of singing teachers, of singers, and words themselves, sung, spoken or read. Should words be expositional or inspirational? Metaphorical or clear? What about singing itself? Is it words or sound? Speech or song?

In this series of articles, I want to show that these distinctions are not necessary. All words are, in a real sense, metaphorical, and all metaphor is meaningful. Vocal pedagogy has been immeasurably enhanced by the findings of anatomy, physiology and acoustics. We have a much clearer idea of what is possible for singers, what is helpful, what can never be achieved, and what is damaging. The question is: what language is best to communicate the findings of science? Which words change people?

Science, thankfully, can help us here too. Fields such as the psychology of learning, linguistics, sports science, neurology and the evolution of language have much to offer the teacher of singing. They can help us address questions such as: how can I best communicate with this singer? How do people learn? How do they change? How does the brain organise and coordinate movement? What is the relationship between speech and song? What is singing? Are words enough for singing, or is singing "words plus sound"?

These articles are the scourings and devourings of hundreds of research papers from a wide variety of fields. Whilst most of these papers are not addressed directly to singers, they offer us a great deal. I have attempted to draw out salient points, and present them in a coherent and useful fashion. I consider what the relevance might be. To minimise opinion and maximise neutrality, I quote

extensively from the papers themselves, and all are clearly referenced. Where there is still debate and doubt, I hope I show that.

I believe a richer, united view of vocal pedagogy is possible. One that understands both the value of scientific information, and the subtlety of the various ways of communicating it, that align with human brain, body and imagination. A view that acknowledges the power and potential of words.

The goal of the singing teacher is to positively change their charges, not to be right. Words are deep tools. They are one of our primary means of effecting change, alongside demonstration, exercises and presence. Used effectively, they can be transformative. Words also have their pitfalls, as we shall see, and we *can* trust “un-worded” and metaphorical communication, without anxiety or accusations of mysticism. Precision can coexist with perspective: words with feelings. Singers are artists after all.

I hope that these articles will offer approaches and guides to thought that can help us communicate change effectively. Approaches that are firmly grounded in current research and science. I hope they offer ways of thinking that are in line with human learning and communication. I hope most of all, that the apparent chasm between the language of science and the language of metaphor is bridged, in fact, shown to be no chasm. There are ways of looking at things that can be different but complementary, neither needing to negate the other.

What any good singing teacher wants is to help their singers. They will do anything they can think of to achieve that end. This research project is my contribution, and I am happy to share it. If you have comments, questions or criticisms, please do contact me directly through my website:
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