

Words for Technique.

The word “technique” means something different to everyone who utters, thinks or teaches it. To teach technique is to be part of an interaction between two people, where one aims to improve the performance of the other.

We can respect this richness and diversity of meaning, but nevertheless suggest that technique has been seen through two different lenses: one functional/anatomic/acoustic/physiologic, the other metaphoric/imaginative.

To distinguish between these two approaches, we need new words, as I’m not aware of any that yet do. I’m going to use techno-physical and meta-technical.

Techno-physical approaches I define as those that use the language of anatomy, acoustics and physiology in working with a singer. Scientific and anatomic terms are deployed to share the findings of those sciences with the singer. The singer is asked to act upon that information. Physical change is sought through direct terms and direct action.

Meta-technical approaches, by contrast, cover any method of teaching where physical change is promoted indirectly. The findings of science are known and absorbed by the teacher, but the language of science is not used. Meta-technical approaches include the metaphorical, textual and imaginative, as well as resonance and register approaches. Meta-technical teaching inspires physical change using indirect means and language.

The border between these approaches is fuzzy. Most writing and teaching I have come across relies on a complex mix of the two. Any given lesson, book or singing day will probably incorporate both ways of thinking. Both approaches have their place and use.

If there is, though, a power imbalance between them, the techno-physical might have the upper hand. It appears to have the authority of science, which is not so readily available to the meta-technical. It claims precise and direct language.

I propose a rebalancing, and so the first six articles of this series examine possible limitations and cautions in the use of techno-physical approaches. *Are they* clear and non-metaphoric? Are the assumptions and implications of the method validated and positive?

Let’s take an example of a possible techno-physical instruction: you need to raise your soft palate more

as you sing. The assumed, positive, characteristics of such an instruction are that:

- It is unambiguous
- It refers to a specific part of the body
- It tells the singer what to do with that part of the body.
- It is metaphor-free.

The instruction requires:

- An internal focus: the singer's attention is turned inwards, to their body.
- An explicit mode of teaching: I tell you what to do and you do it.
- That a part of the body, "the soft palate" is, in some way, a thing.
- That "raising" a "soft palate" is a thing that can, in some sense, be done directly by the singer.

Other examples of techno-physical instruction could be:

- You are retracting and tightening the base of your tongue as you sing. Place your thumb here, under the jaw, and you will feel tension at the onset of the sound, and through the phrase. See if you can sing without tensing there. Encourage a feeling of widening and release.
- Your posture is collapsing through the phrase. Try it again, maintaining a feeling of nobility and gentle expansion in the sternum as you do so.
- As you ascend the scale, the larynx (or cricoid cartilage) must tilt: the cricothyroids need to engage. Sing the scale again and encourage a feeling of turn as the pitch rises.

All these instructions are explicit, anatomic, turn the focus inwards, and suggest a model of direct, atomic control of brain over body.

I'm going to examine these assumptions separately. Are there any consequences to adopting an internal focus as you learn? Is explicit teaching clearly beneficial? Is the language of science non-metaphorical? Does the model of brain-body relationship implied correspond to what is currently known? The answers may cause us to temper any over-enthusiasm for the techno-physical, and lend support to a balanced use of meta-technical language in singing teaching.

What emerges in these articles, that review a substantial body of research literature, is the sense that words carry implications and significance beyond what we might expect. Apparently direct and non-metaphoric meaning is not so easily come by. All words are richly linked and networked. Words can create expectations of some actions, whilst denying the possibility of others. They can increase or

decrease the possibility of success in a task. Words can be in harmony with, or fight against, the workings of mind and body.

Words connect more deeply and offer greater physical resources to the singer than at first sight. We can draw more heavily on them and reconsider the relationship between speech and song. In the first instance, the words of a singing teacher have more power and significance than may be apparent: we should choose them carefully.

The first article considers the effect of the *focus* promoted by words used in teaching. Is there a difference in effectiveness of learning in using an internal or an external focus? Does one promote greater success in progress and retention than the other? Techno-physical language implies an internal focus, whilst meta-technical teaching, in general, does not.

Alex Ashworth

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