

Feature

Good Voice Practice

For Non-Specialists

by Sara Clethero

This article was prompted by my experiences at a recent seminar hosted by the ISM.

All teachers have to speak, and most musicians have to sing, at some stage in their careers. Many instrumentalists need to work with singers as co-musicians. There is therefore every reason for all musicians to understand what constitutes good, healthy use of the voice – quite apart from the personal benefits mentioned below.

Is there a consensus? Mercifully, the days of the singing teacher teaching a 'system' of voice which was alleged to be different from all other systems and the only one to guarantee success, unrelated to what is going on elsewhere, seems to be virtually defunct. There are one or two American 'systems' going the rounds, mostly apparently with the aim of justifying vast fees for their protagonists. But on the whole there are certain 'commonsense' principles which are common to most reputable teachers practising in this country, and to a certain extent in the rest of Europe. These teachers may disagree bitterly over certain details of their practice, and indeed the details may make a crucial difference to the aspiring professional competing for work in an ever more crowded market place. But these finer distinctions do not affect the basic principles which the non-specialist needs to know about the healthy use of a voice. The following is an attempt to list these basic principles:

1. the voice is activated by the breathing mechanism (see Kristin Linklater's *Freeing the natural voice* – a bible for good voice use). It works best when it is connected to the breath within a physical framework which is as free as possible (this is not necessarily the same thing as being relaxed: one way to explore the idea of physical freedom, and therefore effectiveness, is through the Alexander Technique – the Society for Teachers of the Alexander Technique can be contacted on tel: 020 7727 7222);

2. unnecessary tension at the jaw joint and base of the tongue will produce a 'hard' sound which most people will find uncomfortable to listen to, even if they are not sure why;

3. a good teacher and to some extent the observant lay person, will be able to tell whether the use of the voice is free by observing the appearance of the speaker/singer, particularly the line of the spine and the area around the eyes and mouth;

4. a voice which is being well used will carry more easily and be clearer than a voice which is being forced out in spite of unnecessary muscle tension;

5. on the whole, the student should expect that anyone teaching voice in a professional context has reasonably good use themselves. So, for example, if a teacher cannot project their voice across a smallish hall, speaks with their eyes closed (yes, really!) or tries to introduce jerky movements of the neck (which would normally be avoided by a qualified gym instructor, let alone a music teacher), it is a fair bet that this person does not know what they are doing. No-one should put themselves through a process which tightens the voice rather than freeing it.

These observations are all the more poignant because the voice, when integrated with the body and freely available to its owner, is uncannily empowering. In the groups which I run as part of Opera Mint, I regularly see almost miraculous transformations in confidence and general bearing – people who learn to overcome the frustrations and difficulties of their daily lives and careers by accepting responsibility for their voice. They do this by opening themselves to exploring technical alternatives and by being prepared to give up habits which interfere with it. Of all musical instruments, it is most connected to the personality and body of the performer (when properly used!). The joy and lightness which learning to sing can bring to someone is quite extraordinary. There is, moreover, no other instrument which is distributed irrespective of social and economic status, and which is available to anyone who has the courage and openness to use it.

There is no 'quick fix' to short-circuit the process of learning to use the voice (though someone who has already acquired some of the discipline needed, for example through dance, may go through it faster). The power unleashed by this process puts a special responsibility on the teacher, who has to be responsible not only for the voice itself, but also for the well-being of the student while they are going through this process. To free the voice is to open a window on to the personality, and it is a dreadful thing to use that opening to do harm to someone. An individual opening themselves to vocal change is putting their personality on the line, and they have the right to the



Sara Clethero
(photo by Robert Carpenter Turner)

In summary, it is of crucial importance that all musicians can recognise healthy, effective use of the voice. Because the good use of the voice has such a profound effect on the user, this is even more important than good practice in other areas of music. There are certain generally accepted principles of good use which are liberating to put into practice and which make possible the subtle and sensitive response of the singer to the music or text being performed. To ignore these principles is to leave a great storehouse of musical ability and expression untapped.

Sara Clethero MA GBSM ABSM belongs to the ISM's Birmingham Centre, and is a member of the Society's Specialist Section for Professional Private Teachers. She qualified as a counsellor and social worker at the London School of Economics and Birmingham University in 1972, and as a singer and singing teacher in 1982. She has taught singing since then. Since 1990, Sara has been the artistic director of Opera Mint, a training organisation for opera singing which has continuing collaborations with eminent teachers such as the tenor Anthony Roden, singing coach Ingrid Surgenor MBE, Jean-Pierre Blivet of France and members of the voice department of the Royal Shakespeare Company, among many others.

highest possible level of respect and professionalism. It is all too easy to abuse the position of mentor in this situation, and to use it control rather than enable. For instance, I have seen teachers demand a response from the group just slightly faster than the rhythmic pulse would have dictated. By doing this, and introducing an element of unpredictability, they turn it into an exercise in group control rather than enabling members of the group to find their own breathing rhythm and vocal freedom through a pattern over which the whole group had control.

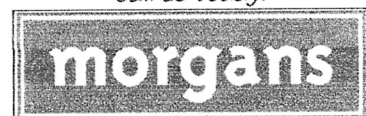
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