Cantors

And the Spirit Sings

THE WORD PNEUMA, OR SPIRIT, CONNOTES MANY IMAGES FOR THE SINGER: "PNEUMATIC," AS IN "WIND" instrument, or "pneumonia" as in life-threatening respiratory illness. The elusive vocal instrument, invisible yet powerful, is a "pneumatic instrument"—one that relies on air to create its sound. The more subtle implication of the word, however, is one of spiritual and emotional power that which swells within us to express our innermost thoughts, convictions, and prayers. At Duquesne University, where I teach, our motto is *Spíritus est qui vivificat*—It is the spirit that gives life. There is a direct correlation to each of us as a singer.

The spirit is deeply rooted in our most personal instrument: the human voice. Through the breath that flows from the lungs through the voice box, creating the vibrations that pass through the throat and mouth, gaining tone color and resonance from the shape of the unique surfaces inside, we are able to convey meaning to text, which expresses our innermost convictions and emotions. No matter what our ages, the physical process of producing sound is the same. The quality of that sound can be controlled by our own physical actions as well as by our investment in the spiritual and emotional meaning of the text and the intense response to rhythm, melody, and harmonic structure in the music.

Many of us are motivated to express ourselves in song, yet the results of our efforts are far from pleasing to the ears of those who hear us. A choral conductor has the imposing task of not only choosing and teaching the repertoire, but also of building the instrument. Unlike our instrumental counterparts, who can always upgrade to a better quality—i.e., more expensive—instrument, we singers must learn to make the best of our God-given instrument.

There are a few simple premises that describe the concept of singing. First, when we sing, our *entire* body is our instrument; not just that tiny little voice box housed in what we commonly call the "Adam's apple," but the entire body! Second, the voice is a pneumatic instrument, and we must learn to "play" that instrument.

Third, singing is an athletic activity, requiring great physical energy and muscular action. Probably, most importantly, to we who are teachers or conductors, singing is a *learned behavior*! There are those who profess that "anyone can sing" and accept all of God's creatures into the fold; however, if one aspires to the most beautiful representation of the singing spirit, it is more accurate to say that everyone can be taught to sing, if they begin early enough and are taught in a logical, sequential way.

So what does this mean to those of us who work with amateurs, and in particular young singers whose spirits are willing but whose "vocal flesh" is quite weak? It means that in our rehearsals we first teach the singers, then we teach the music! Though this may seem quite nebulous, or even daunting, it really needn't be. Read on for a way to demystify the process of singing.

Vocal Vital Signs

There are basic signs of vocal "health," our *vocal vital signs*. In the same way that the doctor checks our temperature, heart rate, and blood pressure because these are fundamental indicators that our bodily "instrument" is working properly, the three signs of *posture, breathing,* and *embouchure* can indicate if our vocal instrument is working properly. As in medicine, these apply to all age groups of singers, from the youngest beginner to our most dedicated senior singer!

Let's begin with *posture*. To continue with the metaphor that our body is our "instrument," would it be possible to play our trumpet if it were not assembled properly, or our flute if someone accidentally stepped on it,
bending its precise form? Yet, how many times do we overlook the slouched bodies on chairs in front of us, those wonderful "couch potatoes" conditioned by years of TV watching or Net surfing. Try starting each rehearsal with exercises that "assemble" the instruments. Stretching, bending, lunging, and neck rolls not only get the kinks out of the instrument, but also promote relaxation.

Sixty seconds of basic warm-up exercises that you can extract from any aerobics video or from your school's phys. ed. teacher will increase the productivity of your rehearsal in a way you never dreamed. Look for exercises that stretch and align the spinal column, elongate the neck, eliminate tension from the shoulders, widen the back, and loosen the knees.

Once the posture is in correct position, the "instrument" is ready to take fill up the lungs from the bottom while simultaneously engaging the support muscles of the upper abdomen, while eliminating the lift of the shoulders. Another helpful image is to pretend you are sipping air through a straw. Both of these images will promote an elevated chest, allowing the lungs to expand fully to supply a steady stream of air to create the tone.

Once the air is in the lungs, exhalation can be jump-started with the aid of a simple pulse of the diaphragm muscles. This action can easily be demonstrated to the most inexperienced singers by asking them to laugh like Santa Claus while placing their hands on the front of their waists. Using their lowest voices, three ho-ho-ho will involuntarily cause the diaphragm to pulse and activate the exhalation of air. The addition of pitches and rhythms, getting an extra push of air for a high or extended note value, or taking a catch breath in the middle of a long phrase. Pulsing can be applied to any melodic exercise, such as simple major or minor triads, arpeggios, or short scale-wise patterns. This technique is important to staccato or marcato passages and for articulation in chant or baroque and classical literature. (See figures 1 and 2.)

Another very versatile exercise is the lip trill. Who hasn't blown bubbles in the bathtub or used rhythmic breathing while swimming? This is the same lip and breath action, only out of water! Moistened and soften the lips, then trill, either on a pitched or non-pitched breath. If your column of air is not supported with a continuous muscular action, the breath will not reach the lips to cause them to flutter. Not only is this a foolproof way of testing for support, but it also is an excellent exercise for loosening up the lips to improve diction. (See figure 3.)

The basis of a beautiful tone lies in the effective management of the air stream as it leaves the lungs. One type of exercise to develop the ability to support smooth phrasing combines movement with breathing. Since we cannot see air moving out of the body and into the air, we can use the arms to indicate the measurement of its release. Upon inhalation, the singer can raise his arms to the count of one, then lower them incrementally while exhaling either on a hiss, a lip trill, or on a designated pitch while the conductor counts a prescribed number of beats. Start simply, to the count of four, then eight, twelve, and up to sixteen beats. Analyze the phrase lengths in the repertoire for the number of beats required and devise the length of the exercise to match.

*Embouchure,* or the way we position our mouths (both inside and out), is a term familiar to all wind players. Without the correct mouth position the tone that results from breathing.

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into an instrument can be nothing short of a hoot! Yet, amateur singers frequently sing with the same mouth motions they use to speak, resulting in honking, squeaking, or nasal out-of-tune sounds. Teaching our singers to form a correct embouchure will automatically improve the blend of your choir.

It is simple to explain with the metaphor of a room. Our mouth cavities are like a room with walls (the cheeks), ceiling (the soft palate), a floor (the tongue), and a door (the lips). The most resonant and pleasing sounds result when the soft palate is high and arched, the cheeks are tall, the tip of the tongue rests on the back of the bottom teeth (like wall-to-wall carpeting), and the doors are opened outwardly. We know we sound better in a space that fits this description, so if we learn to create that space inside our own mouths, we create our own singing room.

One way to assist untrained singers in developing this position is to ask them to prop their jaws in the palm of the hand, then gently squeeze the cheeks between the thumb and forefinger until the corners of the lips become "tucked in." Imagine a piece of Velcro on the back of the bottom teeth that meets up with another piece on the tip of the tongue. Say the word high on relatively high pitches—you may want to imitate the familiar tone qualities of Julia Child or Margaret Thatcher as a model. Once your singers are in touch with the feeling of this embouchure, try singing a familiar song entirely on one vowel sound (see or e are good first choices) while propping the jaw. Remove the prop to see if the singers can replicate the same tone without physical assistance. Try the same exercise using other vowels, encouraging the singers to memorize the feeling of the embouchure while listening to the tone quality it produces. They should hear a marked improvement in quality, resonance, volume, and blend among the choir members. Eventually you can add consonant combinations for new pronunciation and rhythmic precision challenges. (See figure 2.)

Those who work with children’s choirs need to take care to develop the natural head voice of the child. This often means exploring the vocal possibilities in the speaking voice first. Sometimes, imitating a simple "siren" can achieve this. Once this range is uncovered, conductors will need to vocalize from the high notes down, to bring the pure color of the head voice down into the lower ranges. (See figure 4.) An additional important consideration is the choice of key for the repertoire sung. An average tessitura for middle school age children still singing in an unchanged voice is the treble octave d1–d2. Choir directors should choose music (or transpose it) to center around these pitches in order to promote healthy vocal development and beautiful tone color.

While the concept of vocal vital signs may be overly simplified so that they are relatively easy to comprehend, they provide a manageable concept for training singers. The key is to make them a habit! One cannot “unlearn” years of involuntary singing in a few rehearsals. The conductor must take serious his or her role as voice teacher, applying concepts in every new musical example until the singers can truly perform independently. Just as the breath in our body keeps us alive, the pneuma will do so for our singers, and ideally for those with whom we share our ministry of music.

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