

A Few Words on Vocal Technique

by Edward Walter

When I first heard recordings of Jussi Björling, I was struck by the brightness of his voice, the beauty of his sound, and the brilliance of his high notes. He surpassed all the tenors I had heard on records except Enrico Caruso. When I saw Björling live, I became aware of another advantage he had over other singers: his voice was produced effortlessly, as if it was not connected to a body, as if it floated outside and above him. Björling's technique became the standard I used to judge other singers. It also led me to analyze singing technique and style.

When people talk of vocal technique, they often refer to the mechanics of singing: the ability to execute vocal runs and trills, to vary the sound from *mezza voce* (half voice) to *pianissimo* (very soft) and to be able to execute *messa di voce* (hit a note *pianissimo*, swell the note to full voice, and return the note to *pianissimo*). Because Maria Callas was capable of some of these feats and could sing with great musical and dramatic feeling, critics called her a great technician. This is a mistake because technique has another part, the part Björling excelled in: the ability to produce sound effortlessly and evenly. Good vocal technique starts there. Because Callas's vocal production was seriously defective, as even her most ardent fans admit, I rate her lower than most critics do, but that's a topic for another essay.

In the Italian and French operatic traditions, good singing starts with a

beautiful sound and vocal training should try to create and enhance it. Training can improve the vocal sound by teaching how to reduce tensions in the throat, how to support tones adequately, and how to place the voice so that it resonates well. Still, training cannot change the basic timbre of the voice. Björling and Beniamino Gigli had naturally beautiful voices that blossomed because they produced sound properly. Early in his career, Luciano Pavarotti had a superbly produced voice, but his sound was not so beautiful as the other two. Beautiful, yes; equal to Björling's and Gigli's, no. In other ranges, Victoria de los Angeles, Marilyn Horne, Robert Merrill, and Ezio Pinza had naturally beautiful sounds.

Beyond timbre, the goal of vocal training is to get the student to produce sound effortlessly over a wide range. As I go into this subject, I warn the reader that although I have studied voice and read extensively about vocal production, I have not been a voice teacher. Furthermore, there is no universal standard of proper training. As former Metropolitan Opera soprano, Penelope Daner, once said to me, "Every great singing teacher has produced one great singer." Her remark was made half in jest, but it was not far from the mark. And we know that some first-rate singers eschewed professional training.

Mario Del Monaco left the Rome Opera School after six months because his training made him capable of

singing only *leggero* roles like *Alma-viva*. He learned how to expand the size of his voice by listening to recordings, especially those of Caruso and Pertile. As we know, he was the premier dramatic tenor of the 1950's and 1960's. In an interview with Stefan Zucker, Carlo Bergonzi explained that he came out of the Parma Conservatory as a baritone with a limited top range. Realizing that he was not a true baritone, he taught himself how to sing tenor. Roberto Alagna, too, was largely self-taught.

The first step in singing is to take in sufficient breath to support tones that range across the low, middle, and high registers. Ideally, these registers should be integrated so that a uniform sound is produced. Few singers achieve a uniform sound because the vocal chords change vibratory patterns as a singer goes from low to high. The low and middle registers require chest tones, and the high register emphasizes head tones. High notes retain some chest resonance, but in a diminished amount. A special problem occurs at the *passaggio*, i.e., the notes where the voice shifts from the chest to the head. Singers tend to tighten the folds of the vocal chords on these notes, which changes the vocal sound for the worse. As he aged, Pavarotti tightened the throat to maintain a uniform sound. He succeeded, but at the cost of making the voice slightly constricted. The second problem occurs in the shift to high notes. If there is too much chest on those tones, the voice does not have ring or brilliance, what the Italians call *squillo*; if it has too much head, it turns to *falsetto*—think of Frankie Valli of the Four Seasons.

The typical problems of those with an inadequate technique are that the throat tightens constricting the sound (Kurt Baum in the middle register), the voice color changes as the singer

shifts from one register to another (Roberta Peters middle register was warm and full, but her high register was thin and chirpy), the voice loses support and turns to a whisper when the singer shifts from the middle register to the low register (Gigli), the voice shifts from a vertical position in the middle register to a horizontal one in the high register (Giuseppe Di Stefano, Pavarotti after age 45 or so, and Karita Mattila throughout her career), too much chest tone is exerted in the high register which creates a forced sound (Placido Domingo and Giuseppe Giacomini), the voice has too much *falsetto* in the high notes thereby losing resonance (Bergonzi).

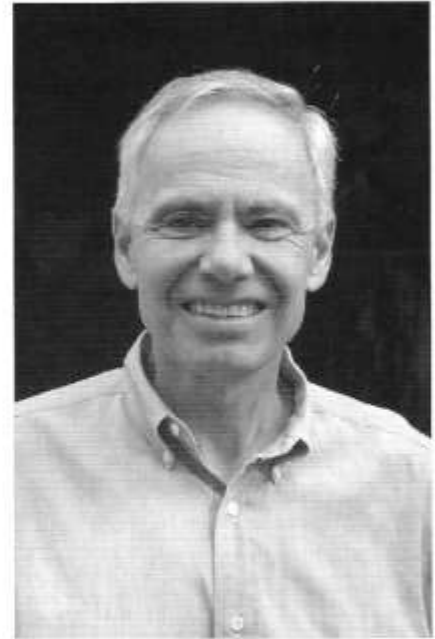
The ideal of singing requires sufficient breath to support the voice in all registers. Giovanni Martinelli, Björling, and young Pavarotti were masters at this. The mouth should be held in a vertical or oval position and the soft palate raised, which will send air into the mask, i.e., it will resonate behind the nose and eyes. Caruso and Björling locked the sound in the mask, which kept the tone forward. For them, high notes were brilliant but the sound was virtually the same as the sound of middle notes. Uniquely, their high notes had *squillo* but also great resonance. Pavarotti had *squillo*, but little chest resonance. Richard Tucker was another exemplar in this regard. Tucker always kept his mouth vertical so that the notes in the *passaggio* and upper register had the same sound as the notes in his middle register. To watch him sing was a lesson in proper voice placement. His only production flaw was that he used a *falsetto* sound when the music called for *pianissimo*.

I have alluded to Luciano Pavarotti several times. In a personal email, Albert Innaurato observed that Pavarotti was the last great *lirico-spinto* tenor in the tradition of Caruso, Gigli, and

Björling. Alas, as he shifted to heavier roles, Pavarotti changed the placement of his voice as he ascended the scale. As a consequence, his high notes spread. Although they still had *squillo*, the change in sound was jarring. In the early 1930's, to compensate for age and to gain volume for dramatic roles, Gigli spread the tone. He claimed he could do this successfully because he had great breath control, and he warned other tenors not to follow his example. The first victim of following his example **not** his advice was Di Stefano. By his late 40's, his voice, one of the most beautiful, was in serious decline. Pavarotti never lost his voice, but it was not so well-placed as it had been. And Gigli too lost some vocal beauty in the trade-off.

Björling remains an exemplar of one who sings perfectly. He never changed the basic technique to produce more volume; he just increased air support. With his superb musicality and his technical mastery, he must be regarded as a supreme master of the art of singing.

Edward Walter earned a Ph D. from New York University in 1968 and has been professor and chair of the Philosophy Department at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. His publications on liberal democracy earned him a spot on a select Club of Rome research



Technical observer Edward Walters

team. Besides several articles published in conjunction with the group, Walter's own book, *The Immorality of Limiting Technological and Economic Growth*, was published by State University of New York Press in 1981. Renowned Berkeley philosopher, Wallace Matson, called this work, 'an exemplary piece of straight thinking in deflation of fashionable humbug.'

Walter retired early from the university in order to pursue a career as novelist. In his youth, Ed studied to be an opera singer and actor. Fiction writing is a natural extension of his lifelong interest in literature and the performing arts. ■

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