

COMMON DENOMINATORS—SPEAKING AND SINGING
by Joan Melton, PhD, VASTA Newsletter, spring 1999

The training of singers is often very different from the training of actors. I maintain they should be far more similar. Most singers would benefit enormously from the physicality of actor/theatre voice training, and actors would audition with greater confidence if singing were taught as just another use of the voice—like laughing, crying, screaming, shouting, wailing.

There are common denominators between speaking and singing. Finding out what they are and making them our own requires study and research and a genuine openness to rethinking what we "know."

Too often actors and singers feel torn between their training in the voice studio and their training as actors. Singers are concerned with vocal *quality*, and particular kinds of quality, as well as with vocal health. Actors need *voice* as an element of characterization, as an available tool for communicating.

Although actors and singers share the concern for vocal health, the last thing an actor wants to do is choreograph the voice, or predetermine its particular qualities in the same way that a singer might. Singers need to sound "good," or even "beautiful" most of the time. Actors may use any sounds that are appropriate, and *appropriate* is often not "beautiful" in the *bel canto* sense.

Musical theatre and opera necessitate an integration of perspectives. Actor/singers, singer/actors must have both 1) the concern for vocal quality and 2) the unconscious availability of the *whole* instrument—body and voice—in response to impulse and imagination. Appropriate work can facilitate that integration—even for those actors who sing only sixteen bars of a song and brief solos and choruses in a variety of productions.

Years of training as a singer took me through "good" and "bad" techniques, including pushing out the abdomen while singing. Yes, I worked with a tight belt around my middle, clenched my buttocks, pushed my larynx down, and tried virtually every other way of "freeing" the voice—and sang Webern and Schoenberg and Berg and Schumann and Mozart, in spite of my training!

After 15 years of searching for a very physical way to teach singing, I met Catherine Fitzmaurice and began to breathe, not in some weird way that kept me focused on technique, but in the way my body wanted and knew how to breathe. Then David Carey, at Central, taught me what was happening in the body, and Meribeth Bunch changed forever my perspective on teaching singing.

My students in musical theatre or opera begin each lesson exactly the way they'd begin a session in theatre voice—on the floor, if possible, integrating the body, voice and emotional life of the actor through physical "exercises." Specific vocalises follow, on the floor or sitting or moving about, for focusing and supporting the entire voice with ease and confidence. The approach often comes as welcome relief! Suddenly a lot of things make sense and bits and pieces of misinformation are discarded.

I teach breathing as a conscious deepening of the body's natural pattern of inhaling and exhaling. I cannot overemphasize the significance of starting from the physiological base. Critical for both singing and speaking is the student's understanding of the body's ability to breathe in without the necessity for gasping, or noisy inhalation. Also, many singers have been trained to work fairly high in the abdominal area for "support." However, keeping the (inward) action as *low* as possible—and releasing the abs on the in breath—will actually free the torso and open up enormous possibilities for range, resonance, and emotional response. Students often discover "a voice under the voice" rather quickly, and extending the high range, speaking and singing, becomes easy and fun—with a few other principles, or common denominators, in place.

First principle: ribs swing out for inhalation and remain open and relaxed—floating down but never squeezing—during exhalation. No collapsing the upper chest or caving in the middle of the torso.

Second principle: throat is relaxed and open. By "open," I mean a gently lifted soft palate and a tongue that falls front, tip resting at the lower gum ridge for all vowels and diphthongs (in Standard American and British). In addition, the action of the tongue is isolated from that of the jaw, so the tongue does its own work, e.g., the difference between "ee" and "ah" is the position of the tongue, not the up and down movement of the jaw.

Third principle: think *down* as you go *up*! This is a familiar concept to many singers and it becomes a valuable habit over time. Students often lift the chin and thrust the head forward as they speak or sing higher pitches. The action not only calls attention to their struggle, but it gives them the opposite result from the one they want. Likewise, students may press the head and/or larynx down to sing lower pitches, which usually limits the low range and resonance instead of enhancing it. Indeed, we may be able to graph the melodic line of a song just by watching the head motions of the untrained or inexperienced singer.

Thinking down as you go up works both psychologically and physically. You will tend to be more comfortable, relaxed and confident thinking down than up for high notes, especially if your aural image is one of strength and fullness as you go up in pitch. Physically, the larynx will tend to stay relatively low, thereby providing more space in the primary resonators, and if the abdominal action is strong—not tight, but strong—the "work" of singing and speaking will be transferred from the throat to the abs.

Fourth principle: it is important to find a *clear* sound throughout the range, that is, to focus the tone, so that it is not breathy, especially in the middle to low range. There are many exercises to help with focus and clarity in both singing and speaking. I mix and match my own with Linklater, Lessac, and other work from both singing and theatre voice training.

Fifth principle: use the articulators efficiently, that is, use what is required to shape the sound and let go of extraneous tension and activity. It is not necessary to distort vowels and otherwise make strange faces in order to sing well. As we speak, so we sing. We may need a bit more room in the mouth occasionally, especially for high notes, but the words should come out as clearly as if they were spoken. Syllable stress should be the same as for speaking! Use operative words, breathe where it makes sense to breathe, where you'd breathe if you were speaking. Do the same actor work on a song you'd do on a monologue. Do it as a spoken piece first; then learn the music.

Teaching a real integration of theatre voice and singing techniques requires extensive training in both. Yet much of what we do in one arena applies to the other. As we help students and clients understand the common ground, we may empower them to sing and act with greater confidence and with a considerable degree of skill!