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1

THE VOWELS.

The singing voice is produced by the same organs as the spoken voice, and, thus by way of the same two cavities, the mouth and the nasal passages.

The mouth is the more important of the two owing to the fact that the walls of the mouth and the organs it contains are the principle agents of articulated speech. That is, the tongue, the soft palate, the muscles that comprise the vocal tube, the teeth and the lips, all together or separately effect the articulation of the word; the variable movements of the jaw sustain a considerable part of this function. Therefore, the mouth, in virtue of its mobility, can modify its diameter, its length and its internal disposition according to its needs; each of the forms that it assumes become the pattern or mold which, when the voice passes through it, acquires a particular sonority. *The vowels are therefore a result of the modification that the sound acquires passing through the vocal tube.*

“The simple (basic) sound that is made give the ear the state (or manner) in which the vocal tube is held during the emission of the breath.” *Traité de la formation mécanique des langues.* t.1, pg. 77 an IX. Carlo de Brosses.

The differences in this simple sound are infinite, as a flexible tube can be guided by imperceptible gradations to its maximum diameter and its maximum length and likewise to its most restricted and shortened state. As a consequence, the number of vowels must necessarily depend on the structure and mobility of the organs; and thus, for this reason the number has been determined by various authors in a great variety of ways.

The Italians ordinarily distinguish only seven vowels, which are: A, E *larga*, E *stretta*, I, O *stretta*, O *larga* and U. However, there could be many more as each of the five vowels present at least two timbres. In the French language the number of vowels was successively elevated by various grammarians from seven to as many as nineteen.

The use of the language was justified in full by de Brosses demonstrating that the number of vowels, or better, the gradations of the vowels is unlimited. In fact, the letters of the alphabet are represented by the vowels with invariable signs, each of which offers different, and easy to hear if emitted by different individuals. There is more: The same person, pronouncing the same word does not give the vowels of this word a sonority and the same identical value constantly; that is, any form of passion (emotion) expressed will add to and animate the speaker, and the vowels will involuntarily be subject to this influence striking our ears with the resulting modification be it clearer or darker, with a more brilliant or obscure timbre. In the word *Amore*, for example, the first letter, the “A” will vary in color according to how it is pronounced, be it a moment of tenderness, rage, irony, prayer or threatening. Yet, every vowel, even though it is subjected to a great number of modifications, seems to remain constant and invariable. It is easy however to explain this illusion; all the vowels find themselves altered by the same proportion; their rapport remains the same; only in their combination do they take on a hue of harmony with the passion (emotion) expressed by the person speaking or singing.

Two principal mechanisms are at the origin of the entire variety of the pure vowels. The first is based on the change of the length and diameter of the vocal tube in conjunction with the movement of the larynx and the pharynx. I have dealt with this at length in my *Memoria sulla voce umana* discussing namely the open and closed timbres. These movements are sufficient to produce a primary series of vowels from the open A and O. The gradual closing of the lips will determine the closing of the O, and closing them further will finally bring it to the U. The second mechanism consists of the modification of the shape of the vocal tube by use of movements of the tongue. This organ applies itself in different ways; the sides of the tongue against the teeth, and, taking the A as a departure point, this action allows for a second group of vowels to be achieved, namely the progression from the A to the open E, the closed E and finally the I. These final two can become EU and U in the French pronunciation by in each case gradually using the closing of the lips to do so.

The *impure vowels* such as the guttural L in Russian and French nasals etc. must necessarily be formed by the use of the base of the tongue or with the soft palate.⁴ Comparing the preceding text with that which is said about the mechanism of timbres, we recognize the existence of an analogy between the vowels and the timbres; that is, it results in a mutual dependence between vowel and timbre: It is impossible to modify one without modifying the other. This observation offers the singer a multitude of possibilities. The singer will find, in determining the implementation of each vowel, the appropriate timbre to each of the effects (passions, emotions) proposed and will allow to maintain at the same time a perfect evenness throughout

⁴ The facts relative to the discussion above are amply exhibited and discussed by Sig. Urbano Gentelet of Lyons in his work entitled *Essai pratique sur le mécanisme de la prononciation.*

the entire extension of the voice. The choice of timbre for each vowel is subordinate to two different things. To clarify this idea, it is necessary to observe some examples.

The timbre of the voice must modify to suit the emotion required/desired. If the melody and the words express a profound sadness or pain, the brilliant timbre imposed on the instrument would denature the concept. For example, the ostentatious and boastful sonority right for Figaro's entrance, "*Largo al factotum della città*" or in the aria of Don Giovanni "*Fin ch'han del vino*" would seem shouted and out of place in Edgardo's "*Fra poco a me ricovero*" or in the Andante of Guglielmo Tell's "*Sois immobile et vers la terre*". The reverse is true if the melody expresses sentiments that are brilliant, the open timbre will render the color, passion and power to the sound. The closed timbre in this case could produce an effect akin to hoarseness.

However, whatever the modification of the timbre may be in relationship to the passion or emotion being expressed, it is imperative that the perfectly even line is preserved through every note. Here we will establish an important rule.

1. So that a voice may be heard to be even throughout its entire extension, a singer must imperceptibly modify the vowels by use of the vocal organs. This is done by gradually rounding the tone to arrive at the high notes and in descending must open the vowel into the clear or open sound. This is perceived as an evenness in the vowel while in fact it is an uneven but well guided result.⁵
2. This process, applied to the various vowels will have the following result:
the A approaches the open O,
the open E approaches the closed E and the French EU,
the I, approaches the French U without the aid of the lips.
the O approaches the Italian U.

The application of this concept should be used in every register throughout the entire extension.⁶

3. If the vowel were to remain open throughout the range like the A in BELTÀ, this would have a brilliant metallic sound in the lower notes but in rising to the high notes it would become strident. In contrast to this, were the vowel to remain closed as in the O in PALLORE, the high notes would resonate with a full and round sound while the low notes would be colorless and veiled. Each vowel when open indicates a way to proceed opposite to that previously indicated. For example: The U approaches the O, the O the A etc.

Take note that the vowels U, I and the French U will tend to shrink and narrow the entire vocal tube. To avoid this inconvenience, the singer must open these vowels a little more than is normally required when speaking.

The different alterations of the vowels that we are discussing must always be ruled by a delicate touch. This is something that can only be achieved with experience. The need to master all the hues of the voice leads us to the following exercise.

*On the same note, and with a single breath and starting in the most open position, gradually progress to the most closed position, then, with another single breath do the reverse from the most closed to the most open.*⁷

The sound should remain at the same volume throughout the exercise. This is most easily achieved initially by starting in the chest register on A and progressing to F#. (It is unwise for female voices to take the chest register higher than E natural. FK.) This can be corroborated in the exercises on unifying the registers and will teach the singer to master all the movements of the throat and to be able to produce sounds varying nature at will.

⁵ With the objective of perfecting the evenness of emission so necessary throughout all of the sounds made with the voice, we recommend maintaining the aperture between the upper and lower jaw equal at all times through all the vowels without exception. The opening must not be exaggerated nor tiring nor ungraceful. In order to achieve this, the student should allow the lower jaw to fall as if by its own weight.

A common defect among students is the tightening of the jaw muscles. This can be rectified by placing a small piece of wood or a cork in the corner of the mouth between the teeth. The singer can also facilitate this by placing a ribbon between the chin and the lower lip and tying the ends at the nape of the neck and then pronouncing all the vowels with minimal effort.

The vowels are exclusively produced with in the glottis and the buccal canal, that is, the space that is comprised of the pharynx, the base of the tongue and the soft palate. This also applies to the formation of the timbres. The anterior part of the mouth and the opening of the lips play no part in this operation other than to allow the sound to be emitted. The vowels A, open E, closed E, the I, and in general all the open and closed vowels must be produced without the use of the lips. However, the closed O, the French EU, the Italian U and the French U are the only vowels that cause the lips to assist in their pronunciation. This process will favor and facilitate the clarity of the articulation. Not doing so and passing from one vowel to another abruptly will produce a sound similar to that of a dog barking.

⁶ Take note that here we consider the falsetto and head registers to be one and the same. (see Physiology in Part 1)

⁷ To practice correctly, the student must remember that the open timbre is the exact opposite of the closed timbre and that they are both formed by the double action we discussed earlier in the use of the larynx and the soft palate. In the open timbre these two parts move towards each other and make a metallic sound. As the voice rises the space narrows and becomes strident until it is stopped by the occlusion of the glottis. The action of swallowing will illustrate this action better. In the closed timbre, the soft palate will rise and the larynx, in lowering, lengthens, and this expands the pharynx. In this second case, the exaggeration of this action will induce a displacement of the vocal cords and produce only a hoarse noise. We therefore can observe that excessive use of this manner of singing will lead to the ruin of the voice.

CHAPTER 2

THE ART OF PHRASING.

The art of phrasing holds the highest place in the science of singing. This includes the study of all its effects and the ways in which they are produced. In order to reach this point perfectly, the singer must combine and unite a complete and extremely complex mechanism with the intelligence and difficulty of the material presented in performance.

Sounds, unlike words, do not convey distinct ideas but only awaken sentiments: thus, any given melody may be made to express different emotions by varying the accentuation. The instrumentalist enjoys great liberty with regard to expression as well as ornamentation and, if we accept certain accents belonging to progressions, appoggiaturas, sustained sounds, syncopations, and melodies of emphatic rhythm – the performer is at liberty to give air to any expression of color he pleases as long as it corresponds with the character of the piece. In vocal music, the choice of effects is much more limited as they are partly determined by those musical accents we have studied earlier; by long syllables which always prevail in vocal music, and by the expression that words require, and which govern the general character of a melody. There is however, great scope for the free inspiration of the accomplished singer.

The principal elements in the art of phrasing can be studied under the following headings:

1. Pronunciation
2. Formation of the phrase
3. Breath
4. Time / Tempo
5. The dynamics of Forte and Piano
6. Ornamentation
7. Expression

Pronunciation has already been dealt with in the previous chapter under “Articulation in Singing” so will not be looked at again here.

Before examining the art of phrasing further, we shall briefly explain the formation of a musical phrase. This will allow us to distinguish ideas composing a melody and the places where breath must be taken; also, to discover those parts of the musical idea which are to be accented by dynamics forte or piano, and those which require the use of ornaments etc.

1

Formation of the Phrase.

Music, like language, has its prose and its verse; but, its prose does not consider or have any regard to the number of bars or the symmetry of cadences, or even to the regularity of time.

The 62nd psalm of Marcello for bass, “*Dal tribunal augusto*” the Largo in Handel’s *Alexander’s Feast* “*Ahi! Di spiriti turba immensa:*” the choruses of Palestrina; chanting and recitative; are all examples of musical prose.

This last kind is wholly influenced by prosodic accents and excitement of passion.

In what may be called melodious verse, on the contrary, perfect regularity reigns which is required to satisfy the rhythmical instinct. In compliance with this instinct, a complete symmetry must be established between the different parts of a melody, and they must be enclosed within certain easily perceptible limits of duration. In this way our ear may unfailingly recognize each element of a phrase in the same way the verse we distinguish the accents and the rhyme. Etc.

We have first to solve the question – what are the dimensions of melodic verse? Were the melodic phrase to be overdeveloped, the feeling of the rhythm and symmetry would be lost, and with it, that of the verse; but if the phrase were divided by too frequent rests, our instinct would unite these various fragments in one continuous phrase.

Example on the next page.