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PREFACE

For the past several years, some of my students have suggested that I write on the subject of the aging voice. This has been due to my apparent success in working with the voices of singers of all ages, but particularly those who have reached their middle years and beyond. My youngest students have been about thirteen years old when they began study and my oldest student recently stopped studying at eighty, not because of vocal problems, but for other health reasons. Both the thirteen year olds and the eighty year old sang with freedom and beauty. Whether or not this makes me an expert on the aging voice, I do have some things to say about the healthful use of the singing voice.

This is not a "do it yourself" book on how to sing! That would be like writing a "do it yourself" book on how to swim. The reader might then jump into the deep end of the pool, confident that he had mastered the art of swimming, and drown. Singing, like swimming, needs a coach. It is the wise singer who has a friendly pair of ears listening to her, to cheer her on, or to say a word of caution when needed. This book, then, is rather a compilation of some of the techniques and philosophies I have used successfully during forty years of working with singers, ideas that have helped many of my students sing beautifully and healthfully for many years. Hopefully, these ideas will help other singers and voice teachers to reach a more complete knowledge of their own vocal techniques and/or teaching methods. Throughout the book, I alternate the use of *his/he* and *her/she*, in all cases meaning both sexes except when obviously referring to a specifically male or female singer.

Anna Russell[1] has remarked that, to have a vocal career, one needs a Glorious Voice, period! In one way, she may be correct. Certainly, in these days when volume seems to be the end of all vocal being, the possession of such an instrument is more apt to win you a contract at the Metropolitan Opera Company than not. I shudder to think what might happen should Bidu Sayaõ show up

for an audition at the Met today. Her perfectly focused but small voice, and her exquisite musicianship would probably not get her a contract in the present vocal market. Perhaps one day we will return to a time when

[1] **All comments of Anna Russell, whether verbatim or not, are from her recordings, *Anna Russell Sings?* and *Anna Russell Sings, Again!* (Columbia Records), or from her live concerts which I have attended.**

beauty of tone and musicality are revered, when sheer volume is not the main criterion of whether one will have an operatic career or not.

A teacher of singing obviously does not start each day with a **Glorious Voice** walking into the studio. In fact, even very good teachers seldom have glorious voices leaving the studio for the professional world. The facts are these: loudness to one side, the great many components that make up a really fine singer seldom occur in the same mind and body. A teacher can only strive to take whatever raw material makes up somone's voice and try to improve it to its ultimate potential. This may or may not include a professional career.

But, thank heaven, a "professional career" is not the only way you can enjoy your voice. Good singers are always in demand at the local and regional level for opera productions, oratorios, recitals, and so on. "Professional" to me has more to do with the *way* you sing, than *how much* you are paid for it! A fine "professional career" is to **SING!** What ever! Where ever! Sing, and sing healthfully throughout your lifetime.

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One calls upon numerous friends while writing a book. I would like to thank the following persons who have made suggestions, proof-read, rescued me from the clutches of my word-processor, and encouraged me along the way: Mary Carter, Herbert Holtje, John Ferris, Dr. Nancy Fontneau, Glendower Jones, Carolyn Nilson, Noel Nilson, John Noecker, Peggy Noecker, Gail Shulman, and Elizabeth Stouffer.

And, were it not for some incredible people who first introduced me to that magical instrument, **The Voice**, this book would have had no germination: Mahlon Searns, Clifford Bair, Harriet Hillier Birchall, Mrs. William E. Neidlinger, Anna Hamlin, Madeleine Marshall, and Olga Alverino. These were my beloved teachers who propelled me into a life as a teacher of singing. It was my studies with them that began this love affair with the voice. It goes on and on.

Finally, I must thank the hundreds of singers of all ages who have been a part of my vocal studio and of my life. As Anna Leonowens sings in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *The King and I*, "When you become a teacher, by your students you'll be taught."

Herbert Burtis
Rood Hill Farm
Sandisfield, Mass.
Summer, 1992

2.

The Vocal Facts of Life

Each prospective student who walks into a vocal studio brings with him a certain amount of raw material: a *unique* vocal sound, some amount of musicality, and most of all, a desire to sing. These commodities obviously vary in degree from person to person. It is the task of the voice teacher to attempt to impart the kind of knowledge that will enable the singer to make the most of his native talent.

I usually begin an initial voice lesson by asking the student for a brief musical biography. It helps the teacher to find out how much study and/or performing experience the student has had. These few non-singing moments also help to put the singer at ease. An audition for a new voice teacher is not the most relaxing activity, and anything the teacher can do to relax the student will help him to sing a better audition.

It is also a good idea to remind the student to bring some music to sing when he makes the appointment. More than one novice auditionee has arrived with nothing prepared to sing and without a sheet of music in hand. It is also important that the singer understands that the teacher would prefer to hear him sing a simple composition he knows well rather than to be treated to a showy aria that is not yet ready for public consumption. This way the singer is more apt to perform a relaxed audition and the teacher will hear the voice in a less stressful situation.

One of my voice teachers would often react to an audition by saying "Oh, my dear! That's just all wrong!" This reaction is sure to make the student feel as though he should be studying wood-carving or plumbing instead of singing. I try to find some aspect of the audition that is positive. "You have a nice vocal quality." "You seem a very musical person." Some affirmative word is essential! Your duty as a teacher is to make the student feel immediately that you like him and that you are eager to help him to sing better, or, if he exhibits no *possible* vocal ability, gently prepare the way to tell him to take up plumbing! It is seldom possible to make a final decision on the ability of any singer based on one hearing. Voices I would have offered slight hope for at the first audition have later blossomed and proved my initial reaction was incorrect. It takes time to discover the true capabilities of an untrained voice or a trained voice experiencing difficulties.

After listening to his biography and the musical selection, I often ask the student to describe to me how his voice works. I get some interesting answers ranging from a detailed, correct description of the vocal method to "Huh?" I then suggest that I share with him my ideas of how the voice works.

3.

Now That I've Got It, What Do I Do With It?

In the first chapters of this book we discussed the use of a low breath to initiate sound. Obviously we have a wide variety of sounds we can produce, depending on what our ear has told us to do. Each individual has a sound that is unique. Some sounds are clear and well-focused, some are constricted. How do you produce a free-flowing, well focused sound?

First, remember that a good sound is most apt to result from a deep, brisk breath. If the singer has trouble focusing the sound correctly, there are ways to help him find a better focal point. I often use the *nasal sound exercise* as was suggested by William Vennard[1] in his excellent book on voice production. The singer should make a duck-like sound: the kind of sound with which one child taunts another: "Yeannh" or "Weannh". This sound should send part of the singer's air through the mouth and part through the nose. To check if you have sung a nasal sound, *lightly hold the nostrils together* while making the sound. If it is indeed a *nasal* sound it should change character radically when the nose is held shut. If you do not hear the tone change you are not allowing any sound to pass through your nose and, therefore, have not made the nasal sound. When practiced correctly you should feel a wonderful buzz happening within the nose and in the area just behind and/or around it. The sound made this way is very active in the *nasopharynx*. This often unpleasant, nasty sound is the **finder** for a good focal point.

Next, sing the nasal sound and then on the same breath let it move quickly to the vowel [i]. This is the phonetic symbol for "e" as in the word "see". This sound should be a clear, open vowel with intense overtone activity **but without a trace of nasality**. To check for unwanted nasality hold the nostrils lightly together during the singing of [i] and there should be **no change in the sound**. If the voice is retaining any nasality the **sound will change** when the nostrils are held. Much of the success of this exercise depends on the ear and eye of the teacher, as well as the sensitivity of the singer to make sure nasality does **not** remain in the open tone. Some singers scrunch up the face while making this sound, thinking they will increase the effectiveness of the nasality. This is absolutely unnecessary.

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[1]**Vennard, William. *Singing, the Mechanism and the Technic*. Carl Fischer, Inc., New York, 1967.**

4.

What's My Name?

There are numerous examples of voices, sometimes very beautiful voices, that have had short careers; not necessarily because of health problems or age, but because the voice was misused or mistyped. A common mistyping of a voice is the mezzo-soprano with a wide range who is convinced by herself, or by others, that she is really a soprano, or even (heaven help us) a "dramatic soprano." By pushing the voice to sing in a *tessitura* that is too high for comfort such a singer may shorten her career or lose her voice altogether. "Tessitura is the general 'lie' of a vocal part, whether high or low in its average pitch. It differs from range in that it does not take into account a few isolated notes of extraordinarily high or low pitch."[1] Certain singers with this problem have realized that discomfort was taking its toll on the voice and have moved back to mezzo again.

It seemed for a few seasons at the Metropolitan Opera Company, that every time Puccini's opera *Tosca* was performed, the leading role was sung by a former mezzo-soprano turned soprano. While much of the role lies in the middle voice, which may sound fine for the mezzo, when it came time for a series of climactic high notes, some of these phrases had to be screamed instead of sung. It was a great relief to me, personally, when true sopranos returned to sing the role.

It can be equally disastrous for a soprano to try to move the voice **downwards** so as to sing as a mezzo or contralto if that is not the true tessitura of the voice. A former student of mine was told, after years of singing as a lyric soprano, that she was really a contralto. She believed the teacher, and by pushing on the middle voice for more power in that range indeed sounded louder there, but effectively shortened her range to approximately an octave and a third.

A danger for some singers is that they are persuaded to sing roles that are too heavy for their voice. A noted soprano who began life singing lyric-coloratura roles started moving into more and more dramatic repertoire. Forcing the voice beyond its natural volume and endurance to perform these roles, she soon began to lose the top of her range, developed a horrendous wobble, and had to retire much earlier than expected had she kept within the limits of her instrument. It is important to determine the repertoire and range within which you can comfortably pursue a long career.

I have had students who sing "pop" music exclusively try to lower their range to

[1] ***Harvard Dictionary of Music*. Belknap Press. 1969.**

5.

I Wonder As I Wobble

A common symptom of an aging voice, or of a voice crying for help, is the **wobble**. Every adult voice has a certain amount of *vibrato* or undulation of pitch. This undulation varies from voice to voice. Vibrato is caused in part by the movement of the involuntary vocal muscles. In general, in free voices, the greater the volume of the voice, the greater the vibrato may be, and the lighter the voice the less vibrato may occur. Vibrato is not a dirty word (some early music enthusiasts to the contrary!). An adult voice that sings with an absolutely straight tone, without a trace of vibrato is a voice that is being **held** to produce that sound. Holding the larynx with the neck muscles to prevent the natural vibrato will eventually take its toll on the voice and may cause the singer some trouble.

Some immature voices have very little vibrato; children's voices, except for those in the children's choruses of opera companies, have almost no vibrato. The "Annie" school of vocal production, so popular in Broadway musical comedies, demands that immature voices be pushed to sound like adult "belters." This technique must, without doubt, shorten the life-span of these fragile, young voices.

Vibrato is to the wobble or tremolo as the single engine plane is to the 747. Wobble is an out-sized caricature of vibrato. Wobble is **not** caused by the muscles of the voice doing their job; it is **the sound of a voice crying for help**. Wobble is often the result of a singer trying to push more volume through a voice than that instrument is capable of producing. The pushing which encourages this quest for too much volume puts the voice in jeopardy. The voice, trying to protect itself, attempts to relax, but if the singer insists on making a sound louder than the instrument can produce freely, the effort to do so will result in the voice shaking and producing a wobble. It is this battle between what the voice does naturally and the pressure exerted upon it by the singer to do something outrageous that must be dealt with to ease this problem.

Usually, the first step I take to eliminate a wobble is to check the singer's **breathing pattern**. (Sound familiar?) If the breath is taken too high in the body, the stress of trying to produce this gigantic sound will all land **squarely on the neck**. Since the neck muscles surround that delicate but resilient larynx, the pressure is placed directly on the sound-making equipment. This pressure sets up a battle between the neck muscles and the larynx and produces a wobble. By developing the idea of a lower breathing pattern, and removing the pressure from the neck, the larynx should relax and the wobble disappear. The singer probably will be making a lot less noise at this point. If she is determined to produce more volume in this

6.

The Breath That Once O'er Eden

Breathy voices are sexy voices! Breathy voices sell perfumes and deodorants. Breathy voices star opposite Humphrey Bogart! **Breathy voices are in!** This may be true in the world of movies, commercial television, or pop singing where the singer has a microphone embedded between the vocal cords; but in the real world of singing, breathy voices just can't be heard.

An important facet of any good vocal technique is the ability to project the voice, whether speaking or singing, so the back row of the auditorium can hear it clearly. Breathy voices just will not carry without electronic amplification. Therefore, if a singer hopes to follow a career on the (mostly) unamplified stage, singing in opera, oratorio, or recital, the breathiness must be eliminated.

There are two kinds of breathy-voiced problems. The first, and easiest to solve is when the student speaks with a normal, more or less focused voice, but when singing allows the tone to become breathy. I attempt to solve this dilemma by having the singer say a word and then immediately sing it in his speaking range.

Often the student has a misconception about the singing voice. Many people have the idea that the singing voice and the speaking voice are completely separate entities. They are not. We have one set of vocal cords with which to initiate sound and one pharynx to resonate sound. These parts of the speech apparatus couldn't care less whether you are singing or talking. **They simply respond to the mental command to make a sound.** The sooner the singer realizes this fact, and accepts the idea that **singing is merely an extension of speaking**, using a wider range of pitch and dynamics and carrying the tone over longer sounds than in speech, the more quickly free singing will flow.

The Speak-Sing Exercise

If the student can **say** the word clearly in his normal speech range, he should be able to **sing** it on a prescribed pitch just as clearly in that same range. It is important that the pitch level of the singer's speech pattern be discovered to be able to perform this experiment. The speech level in women is often much lower than their singing range would make you believe. I taught a coloratura soprano whose speech range lay below middle
C but who sang F above high C with ease. Some of my mezzo students speak as low as F below middle C as a normal course. First determine the speech-pitch, before

7.

Yeannh! Yeannh! Yeannh!

At the opposite end of the vocal spectrum from the breathy voice is the nasal voice. Whereas with most voices the teacher has to work to help the singer achieve a good focal point, the nasal voice seems almost over-focused. There is, of course, no such thing as being over-focused. A voice is either focused or it's not. It's like not being able to be a *little* pregnant! Or saying an interval is *almost* a perfect fifth.

The nasal voice, like the breathy voice can be caused by a physical problem. If this seems to be the case, it is beyond the scope of most voice teachers and should be treated by a doctor or speech therapist. If, however, you are dealing with a lazy soft palate, one that has become accustomed to drooping when a vowel sound is uttered, a voice teacher can be of help. As with the breathy voice, the speaking voice as well as the singing voice may be affected by nasality. It is especially in these cases, where both the singing and the speaking voice sound nasal, that the voice teacher should be very careful about beginning vocal training until it has been ascertained that this is not a physical problem.

Believe it or not, the best way to help train the lazy palate is through the use of the nasal exercise, the "duck-call." A nasal exercise for a nasal voice seems an unlikely direction to proceed, but since the singer can probably make a fantastic duck-call without half trying, you can at least get him to feel the sensation of sound in his nasopharynx instantly. The problem is how to convince the soft palate (and the ear) to close the nasopharynx when a clear vowel needs to be sung.

"I've fallen in love with my own voice" rears its ugly head in many of these cases. For some personal reason, or because someone once told the singer to "sing in the nose" to get more sound, or for whatever reason, this is the way the singer is used to hearing himself. It doesn't sound nasal to him. As with any other vocalism a singer has used for a long time, that vocalism, however unusual it may sound to someone else, sounds quite normal to the person using it.

The challenge for a teacher is to help the singer feel and hear his voice make well-focused sounds without the nasality he has come to know and love. By having the singer sing the nasal sound and then, on the same breath, move immediately to [i], pinching shut his nostrils on the [i], it is instantly obvious if he is trying to retain nasality in the open vowel sound. If the sound of the [i] vowel changes when the nose is stopped, it indicates he is retaining nasality. If the sound does not change when the nose is closed on the [i] vowel the soft palate is doing its job.

The reason nasality remains in an open vowel, then, is because the soft palate has not correctly lifted to close the entrance to the nasopharynx. In most singers this happens automatically. The test of pinching the nostrils shut demonstrates lingering

8.

Roots

The reader may have wondered why I have waited this long to bring up the subject of that hornet's nest: "support." How do you "support" the voice? Do you hold something? Push something? Pull something? Various teachers during the period of my vocal training have told me to do **all** of the above, not necessarily at the same time.

My first voice teacher, the man I studied with when I was in high school, had me stand on his stomach while he was lying on his back on the floor. He would then lift and lower me with his stomach muscles! Now this was an elderly man and I was never a fly-weight, so in lifting me he had his work cut out for him. He could still belt out a high C complete with a sizable wobble when he was in his seventies. But is this support? Incredibly strong muscles that can lift over-weight students? Should singers develop weight-lifters' muscles in order to sing well?

Another teacher wanted me to "attack" each note from the *umbilicus*! What she probably meant was to use the *rectus abdominus* or "sit-ups" muscle. But must singers **attack** sound? Must we spend our days at Muscle Beach rather than vocalizing? **I think not!**

The longer I have taught people to sing the more I am convinced that the "Muscle Beach School of Vocal Production" gets in its own way. Not that muscles are not used in singing, far from it. But too much intentional muscle pushing and pulling, too much belly-dancing simply impedes the activity of those same muscles. If left to themselves with the proper signal from the brain, they would, of their own volition, do a more efficient job. While you certainly can control these abdominal muscles, more flexible singing will result if you can become aware of the work these muscles do for you all the time, and then encourage that work to happen when singing without getting in the way!

In this book I have repeatedly emphasized the **very deep** breath and the quick response of sound. If you will only allow the body to do it, the very lowest muscles of the abdomen will connect and work at the return of that deep breath as it becomes sound. You have to trust that this will happen. It is far too easy to try to help these muscles do their assigned task.

9.

Take Two Deep Breaths And Call Me In The Morning!

One of the most important aspects of any voice teacher's duties must be that of **vocal diagnostician.** To any busy vocal studio come good voices, bad voices, glorious voices, and voices in a lot of trouble. In every case the teacher must make a fairly quick assessment of the singer, of his good points and bad points. Even if a so-called "perfect" singer should wander into the studio, the teacher must at least be able to diagnose him as perfect. Since few teachers or students are perfect, that is not a problem which occurs very often.

Usually, when I hear a voice for the first time I try to make a mental list of the good things as well as the bad things that occur. As I mentioned earlier, if you can find something good to comment upon after the first hearing, it places the teacher and student in a more positive relationship from the outset.

At a recent international piano festival I attended, one of the Master Class teachers listened while a young woman of great talent played an entire sonata by Beethoven, with all the repeats, from beginning to end. He then said: "Well, that was just all wrong!" What a wonderful way gain the confidence of the student. Chopping her fingers off with a machete might be less painful. A good teacher should do the positive thing: teach! Not destroy!

Teachers must not have a system that they follow slavishly, regardless of what the individual singer needs. Every voice is **unique.** No two will ever sound exactly alike. Even in close family relationships, where I have heard a great vocal resemblance between the voices of father and son or mother and daughter, the younger voice is never a clone of the older one. And the young person, even if he physically resembles the parent, is not the parent. Each comes with his or her own set of ideas, problems, joys, woes, and vocal cords. You must deal with each one individually. Pedagogs who teach a "system" or a "sound" often do turn out numbers of singers who sound remarkably similar. But often what these voices share are similar vocal problems.

It is only after working with a new student over a period of time that we come to determine his vocal category. For one thing, anyone is probably nervous singing an audition for a new teacher and is probably not performing as well as he does normally. The teacher also has no way of telling, especially with an untrained voice, or a trained voice that is singing through a lot of vocal problems, what the final sound may be, or what the voice may eventually be able to do. Someone who comes to a teacher singing very out of focus and/or with a high, tense breath will sound very

10.

Je Pense, donc je chant!

Every singer must figure out his or her own technique. This is not to say that each person sings differently from every other person, but that each person may *think* differently about how he or she sings. While most fine singers probably go through approximately the same physical operations in order to produce glorious sound, I'm sure that each individual has certain key words or sensations that only he is aware of, and which help him to relax and produce the sound he makes.

In the "push-me-pull-you" school of singing, everyone is taught which muscles to yank and which to relax. Unfortunately, yanking on some muscles makes it difficult to relax other muscles, and this process gets in the way of good singing because of the tension it encourages. To be able to imagine a sound and produce it in the easiest possible way is, to me, good singing. The fact that muscles in various parts of the body spring into action is due less to your pulling on them than to your *allowing* them to respond to a deep breath and to the *impulse* to sing.

Impulse was a favorite word of Olga Averino. As with any word, "impulse" means something slightly different to each person, but the idea of singing from impulse probably gives most people the image that singing must be a lively, spontaneous, imaginative task, not merely the pulling and hauling about of the body.

Words are extraordinary things. Take the word *blue.* When I say the word, I may think of one specific shade of that color. Each reader may think of a slightly different hue, to some blue is greener, to some yellower. As the old song tells us, "Lavender's blue, dilly, dilly, lavender's green." If lavender can possess this amount of variety so can any word. In discussing the terms that describe the voice and how it operates we must remember that no two persons are apt to envisage exactly the same picture in response to any given word. Think of the variety of statements the police get from several "eye-witnesses" to any crime.

Hence my statement that each singer is responsible for finding his or her own technique. You finally have to *know* how *you* sing! A voice teacher must develop an enormous vocabulary of words and phrases that mean approximately the same thing, so as to allow each individual student to choose the definition or word that makes the most sense to her. I don't care what a student is thinking about when she sings a high C, as long as it is beautifully and freely sung. Maybe the student thinks of nothing! Our friend Anna Russell has suggested that "one reason you have this glorious voice is because you've got resonance where your brains ought to be."

I suggest to my students that they build for themselves an imaginary "singing

11.

Can't Hit Those High Notes!

In a satirical Off-Broadway revue several years ago, one sketch concerned the daughter of a famous "pop" singer who was trying to make a career in show business, relying on extremely limited talent and her father's name. "Daddy," according to this skit, had songs written especially to utilize her incredibly short vocal range. In the skit she was heard to sing "Can't hit those **high** notes, can't sing those **low** notes." The word "high" was screeched a third up from the rest of the minimal tune and the word "low" was woofed down a half step. **It is obvious why that young woman didn't make it.**

In real life, anyone with a range so limited would be well-advised to eschew a career as a singer and take up water-colors or upholstery. Many novice singers come into the studio able to sing only a few notes over an octave comfortably. Vocal range is partly determined by the size and thickness of the vocal cords, *not by what voice part you think you should sing*. Many singers, having developed a flexible technique, will achieve a range of over two usable octaves. Usually a singer will be able to vocalize higher and lower than the part of the voice which is presented to the public. Some singers develop an unusually wide vocal range similar to the mezzo mentioned earlier who sings from tenor E to E above high C with ease.

How do you find those elusive high notes?

First of all you don't "hit" them! "Hit" is a word to put in the **Dirty Word Glossary.** I remember a voice teacher who used to advertise in the New York Times, "I **gave** so-and-so his high C's." What nonsense! No teacher, no matter how wonderful, can give anyone a note that is not inherent in the voice. A teacher may *help* the student to realize these notes are possible, and may help him learn *how* to sing (not "hit") them with more ease, but these high notes had to have been always a part of the individual's vocal range. The singer was just having difficulty singing them easily.

"Fear of Flying" is a common disease among singers. Some tend to think that high notes *should* be harder to sing, therefore you should push hard to hit them. They're way up there at the top of the staff, after all. I attempt to convince the singer to persuade his body that mentally stretching to a high note is much easier than stretching or pushing physically. The temptation to wrench the body upwards: head, neck, shoulders, when trying to "hit" a high note puts incredible pressure on the vocal instrument, making it almost impossible to sing the pitch freely.

Where is your high C and what do you plan to "hit" it with?

I sometimes have a singer imagine an endless rubber band which is attached to

12.

Can't Sing Those Low Notes

While "fear of flying" may be a good term for a singer's paranoia about high notes, you really can't refer to a problem with low notes as "fear of sinking." As was mentioned during the discussion about the range of the voice, just as you can only sing as high as your vocal cords permit, the same is true at the other end of the scale. You can't force the voice further down than the individual vocal cords want to utter sound. You can **force** the voice to do a lot of things, I suppose. Look at the many "Rock" singers who do this daily, but let me amend that statement to read: *You ought not to sing* higher or lower than is healthy for the vocal cords.

We must remember that many voices probably have a wide range of pitches that can be uttered in some way. But forcing the voice constantly to sing in too low a *tessitura* is just as destructive as forcing the voice to sing all the time in an uncomfortably high *tessitura*. The toll taken may be the same in either case: loss of range, discomfort in singing, and if this method of singing is pursued over a period of time, vocal nodes. Most young voices can recover quickly from temporarily singing in the wrong *tessitura*, but since *it is in the young voice* that good singing habits should be formed, realizing that a young voice is more resilient than an older one, there is still no reason to brutalize it.

Many female "pop" singers insist on singing in an unnaturally low *tessitura* to satisfy the public's taste for "lady-basses". In looking at the ranges of "pop" songs that students bring in to me, I am astonished that the composer expects them to sing Fs and Gs below middle C as a general rule. I have determined that some of these "Lady Bass" voices who come into the studio are in reality lyric sopranos. Our friend Anna Russell once suggested that coloraturas sometimes feel the necessity to become "lady basses" in order to earn a living, since "the only people who really appreciate coloratura singing are other coloratura sopranos!"

I have a student, a coloratura soprano who easily sings show music and cabaret songs in her middle range without signs of wear and tear. How does she do it? Using the same basic technique she uses to sing classical music, she allows the speaking range of the voice to sing easily and without strain. **She talks.**

Another student was chosen to sing a role in a musical comedy that stayed below middle C almost the entire time. Although this woman is a mezzo-soprano, it was still a challenge to project an entire role in this low range. I gave her the same advice: talk the role on the pitches the composer has written. Only the singer knew she was talking; to everyone else it sounded like singing!

Often women "pop" singers fear that if they utter any pitch above middle C without "belting" it will sound operatic. Belting is that "pop" and showbiz phenomenon wherein women singers attempt to carry their "chest voice" up as far as it will go without drawing blood! I define "chest voice" as the sound some women can produce on very low notes, remembering that the voice is **one** instrument

13.

The Iron Maiden???

How does a teacher deal with an extremely tense person who wants to study singing? I am talking **Major Tension**. The Voice, the Body, and the Mind! I deal with this problem by suggesting that before the beginning of each lesson, and before he commences each practice session, the singer devote a short block of time to some physical relaxation exercises. It is actually a good idea for any person to follow this regimen.

If a person's body is tense, and has been tense for a long while, **tense** feels like relaxed to him. If he has seldom (or never) experienced the sensation of a relaxed body, he can not have a concept of what relaxation means. Very tense people often grind their teeth in their sleep, unable to relax even then. The teacher must try to help the student find a valid definition of the word **relax**. Until this has occurred, no sensible vocal work can proceed. You can't teach a free, flexible vocal technique to a body that has no concept of freedom.

The following are some exercises I have "borrowed" from various people over the years. These exercises often had nothing to do with singing at the time I purloined them, but since the body has such a total involvement with the art of singing, these body-relaxation exercises seem bound to help the vocal production as well.

Some years ago I took a course in "Body Movement" from Carolyn Bilderback at a Drama Workshop. It is from her that I "borrowed" the exercise which follows.

1. Standing in good posture, reach as high above the head as possible, stretching the arms upward as far as they will reach.
2. Then, suddenly, drop the arms, bending the body downward from the waist, allowing the arms and hands to swing towards the floor, touching the floor if possible (but not essential).

14.

For The Singer With No Voice, But A Marvelous Ear

I don't know if Anna Russell ever uttered the above words, but she should have. Singers who have marvelous ears and a good sense of rhythm are always in demand to sing contemporary music whether they possess Glorious Voices or not. This is fine for them if they also happen to like contemporary music. Often a less sizable voice coupled with a great sense of pitch and rhythm can have, and has had a full career even in these days when **loud** is **great.**

Do you sing differently when performing atonal or ultra-chromatic contemporary music, while making various sound-effects with the voice, the tongue, the teeth, snapping your fingers, and often performing works that demand an enormous range? The simple answer, of course, is **No!** You should be able to use the same free technique for all music. However, contemporary music has a number of musical and vocal challenges not found in earlier periods, and these must be mastered wisely. I have seen more than one good singer strip her vocal gears on a gut-busting, mind-boggling piece of new music.

I am personally very fond of contemporary music and perform a great deal of it, but since most of my performance is at the keyboard, the great leaps, dissonances, and bangs I make on the piano do not harm *me* physically. It is one thing to perform these feats on an external instrument, but for the voice, our internal instrument, this requires a tremendous amount of musical and vocal preparation. To attempt such acrobatics, without a adequate preparation courts vocal suicide.

Even someone with the keenest ear, and the most perfect of perfect pitches, must make sure that her instrument becomes accustomed to the angular lines that are often the norm in contemporary music. The more music in any given style you have sung or played, the easier your ear accepts a new composition in that idiom. When you have sung many works in a contemporary style the ear and voice will accept even the most unusual, difficult passage as quickly as it would a phrase by Mozart. Firstly, it is the *ear* that must accept atonality and other contemporary musical devices, before the *voice* will sing these passages with ease. You cannot sing as comfortably *by eye* as you sing *by ear*. I have seen the best sight-readers with admirable vocal prowess *tighten up and change technique* when reading a very difficult score, whether or not it may be contemporary. After the ear accepts and preferably memorizes the difficult passage the singer must send it through the vocal instrument many times, using only vowels at first until it is fully accepted by the larynx. By this time it should sing as easily as a Schubert *Lied.*

The very quotable Olga Averino tells of the time she sang the first performance in the U.S.A. with the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Serge Kousevitsky of

15.

Chew, Chew, Baby!

Americans love to chew their language. In Italian the vowel [ ] in *casa,* is said and sung just like that: aaah. In English we "offglide" vowels so that each of them starts one place then slyly slips somewhere just a bit away. Singers when performing this offglide are apt to chew with the jaw as this occurs. Chewing is appropriate when you are dining on a rare filet mignon, but when you are singing, chewing, in any language, simply distorts the sounds making it difficult to understand the words. An American in Paris often betrays his nationality the moment he opens his mouth to try his French, not because his vocabulary is insufficient, but because by chewing his way through a phrase, it is obvious that he is not a Parisian.

Make an experiment:

1. Say the French word *"bal"* [bal]. No matter how long the [a] is sustained the sound of the vowel should never vary.
2. Now say the English word "ball" [b l]. You can hear the subtle movement from [ ] to [ ].

This is an "offglide." It is incorrect to carry this Americanism into French, or any other European language. To be a successful singer you must at very least gain a mastery of the perfect pronunciation of the languages in which you sing. This, of course, includes English. We chew our own language unmercifully, gnawing away on poor old Mother Tongue. Because English is a highly diphthongized language when spoken with utter clarity, singers must be very careful to chew as little as possible.

The two books which I suggested earlier by Madeleine Marshall and John Moriarty will be most helpful in this gnawsome problem.

16.

Du holde Kunst!

When Lotte Lehman sang her last recital in Town Hall in New York City only a few persons *knew* it was to be the last. Her final encore of the evening was Schubert's "An die Musik", the last phrase of which translates as "Thou gracious art, I thank thee!" Madame Lehmann had reached this point of the recital in fine fettle, singing with all the youthful vigor that had always characterized her performances. But at that moment such intense personal emotion overwhelmed one of the world's greatest singers that she was unable to utter that final sentiment. No wonder. At the end of a long and glorious singing career the most difficult word to pronounce in any language must be "good-bye." You are not only bidding farewell to a loving public that has followed your every song for many years, you are saying good-bye to a large part of your very being. To announce "I will no longer sing in public" is saying to an artist of this calibre, "I will no longer sing." Yet this is the moment that every singer must face. A few (lucky ones?) die with their boots on, still singing in full voice and allowing only time, that persistent career manager, to cancel their next performance.

How do you decide when to stop singing in public? I believe it was Marilyn Horne who said in an interview on *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson* that she had made an arrangement with her accompanist, whose opinion she trusts (remember those ears you need to have listening to you?) that he would tell her when she started going downhill vocally and was unaware of it. She said she planned first "to cuss him out, and then quit!" Please don't quit yet, Miss Horne.

We have all witnessed numerous farewell performances of older artists. Sarah Bernhardt apparently held the world's record for retiring; it became so lucrative for her to say *Adieu* that she couldn't stop. Most singers usually don't have that option, although Anna Russell has given a *First Farewell Recital* numerous times. There are a few examples of singers who retired

early for reasons other than illness or age. Rosa Ponselle is an example of an extraordinary performer who stopped singing in public at the very peak of her vocal powers. Fortunately, many years later, still in full command of that incredible voice,