

On singing in general

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Vocalise, *phrasing* and *lyric declamation* are, I think I may say, the three foundations of singing.

Vocalise is – or should be – the basis of all vocal practice. Each time we execute, even in a very slow tempo, a sequence of notes emitted on a single vowel, we are performing a vocalise; but this term is more generally taken to mean a sequence of *fast* notes involving various difficulties, *messa di voce* [*sons filés*], ornaments of all kinds, arpeggios, ascending and descending diatonic and chromatic scales sung legato or staccato, etc.

If truth be told, it is not indispensable for all singers to achieve mastery in this branch of singing, where it is essentially light voices that shine and which is only applicable in certain kinds of music and in certain vocal types [*emplois*]. But it cannot be denied that vocalise is a first-rate exercise for the very singers whose voices, talents and roles do not require agility, because it cannot fail to give their vocal organs a flexibility and mobility extremely useful to anyone who wishes to phrase tastefully, in an expressive and nuanced manner. Moreover, there is music that cannot be tackled if one is unable to vocalise well: to mention but a few examples, the oratorios of Bach and Handel, certain Mozart operas, the operas of the Italian Romantic School, Rossini, Bellini, etc.

Phrasing consists in executing a musical phrase, a melody (that is, a series of notes, whether or not they are accompanied by words), in a

homogeneous, clear and impeccably accurate manner, by clearly bringing out its contours and nuances, respecting its punctuation (that is, its pauses, of differing length), while giving it the tone [*accent*] and the accentuation [*accents*] imposed by the sentiment of the music and, if it has words, by the meaning of those words.

The study of this branch of singing includes the study of *breathing considered from the expressive point of view*, of style and of musical colour. The *style* of a piece is dictated by taste and consists in a series of details that gives the music being sung the character and bearing prescribed by the period, the country in which it was composed and the composer's own personality. *Colour*, as the word itself indicates, is the vocal colouring that is given to what is being interpreted; depending on the music and words that are sung, the colour of the voice must vary. Just as the potter does not use the same clay to make a bowl or an amphora, so singers must adapt the quality of their vocal material to the use they wish to make of it. In the same piece, it is sometimes necessary to use several different voices in turn. Sometimes dark, sometimes bright, sometimes monotonous and sometimes changing, the colour of the voice must reflect the emotional state that the composer intended to convey.

In *lyric declamation*, all the faculties acquired through the study of vocalise and phrasing are used, but here they are at the service of the intellect, which uses them to express its thoughts, from the most powerful to the most subtle, and of the heart, which uses them to express its sentiments, from the most intimate to the most impetuous.

The first necessity of declamation is perfect articulation; the second is correct pronunciation. We must not confuse one with the other.



Articulation consists in making the necessary movements with the mouth and tongue for the formation of vowels and the accentuation of consonants. Whether one comes from the North or the South of France, whether one speaks like a native of Marseille, of Toulouse, of Lille, of Auvergne or

of Normandy, that is to say, whatever pronunciation one has, one *articulates*: it is the *pronunciation* that differs. In short, *articulation* is used to *pronounce*, but one may have good *articulation* and poor *pronunciation*.

In pronunciation, the most important role is that of the vowels. The intelligibility of what we say depends to a large extent on the greater or lesser degree to which we open our vowels. It is also the vowels that determine the accent of a particular country or region. One must therefore avoid anything in one's pronunciation that is characteristic of a specific accent. For example, one should not open the 'a' as Normans do when they say 'lâboureur' instead of *labourer*, or close it inappropriately as Southerners do ('Je ne veux *pà*'), just as they unduly close certain 'e's: 'jamé' for *jamais*, 'j'allé' for *j'allais*, etc. Nor should we take the Bretons as models when they pronounce 'graînier' and 'régistre' instead of *grenier* and *registre*. Beware also of consonants and nasals! Do not, like the friendly inhabitants of the South-East, say 'rieing' for *rien*, 'allong' for *allons*, or, like the Auvergnese, 'cherviche' for *service*; or, like the valiant Lorrainers, 'escailler', 'juliet', 'aillieurs' instead of *escalier*, *juillet* and *ailleurs*; or even 'j'ajète' for *j'achète*, as people do in the centre of Brittany! When singing, one must adopt the Parisian pronunciation of vowels and consonants, except for the 'r', because in Paris it is pronounced gutturally [*grasseyé*]. One must never use the guttural 'r' in singing.¹

If deprived of articulation and pronunciation, singing, no matter how beautiful the voice, is of no interest. Yet many opera singers do not wish to be persuaded of this. They have only themselves to blame if the audience, weary of lending an ear in the hope of understanding what they are saying, turns aside from them and prefers operetta and *café-concert* singers who articulate and pronounce correctly.

It is only when one possesses perfect articulation and pronunciation that one can concern oneself with that element which gives lyric declamation its true interest, that is to say, *expression*; and this is where the singer's intelligence comes into play.

¹ That is, the 'r' should be rolled, as in Italian. (Translator's note)

For lyric declamation must be inspired above all by intelligence, which alone can indicate to performers the expression they must confer on what they sing, the intention they must indicate through the way they sing a phrase or a word. If intelligence is lacking, if one fails to comprehend that which one must make listeners understand and feel, the declamation is defective, the accentuation lacks naturalness and truth. It does not awaken what it ought to in the soul and mind of the listener, and the effect is missed. Therefore, it is essential for singers to cultivate and exercise their intelligence. Reading, the contemplation of masterpieces of the visual arts (painting or sculpture), the observation of other human beings, the recollection of what we have experienced, joys or pains, emotions of all kinds, even imitation of people we have seen behaving or heard talking in such and such a way, in such and such a circumstance: all of this can help to give singers a feel for correct declamation and aid them in their interpretation of a role, a piece, a page or simply a few bars of music, and they must constantly take care to feel and tell the truth if they wish to serve as faithful intermediaries between the composer and the audience.



Singers who confine themselves to singing the written notes and words with a beautiful voice, thinking only of showing off the volume, brilliance and power of that voice, are but fools. They are, moreover, unfaithful servants, since they do not fulfil their mission, which is not to shine on their own behalf with frivolous and ignorant people, but to captivate, interest and move attentive, enlightened and sensitive listeners.

It is to be hoped that devotees of the radio and the phonograph, more numerous every day, will thoroughly absorb these principles, generally unknown to the very people who should be their apostles, and first and foremost to singers, who too often only think of 'producing volume', imagining that the bigger the voice they have and the louder they sing, the more talent they possess. Perhaps I will succeed in convincing profes-

sionals and listeners who, being guided neither by vanity nor by self-interest, can allow themselves the pleasure of simply yielding to music.

Let both such categories beware above all the excess of sound which is the very enemy of Music, since it is Noise; it is contrary to the exquisite mystery of colourings and nuances; and it jangles the nerves instead of engaging the intelligence and moving the heart. I would add that if singers sing too loudly, it is their business, and if we refrain from listening to them, they get no more than they deserve; but that one has no right to force to sing too loudly, *against their will*, those singers who have had the intelligence to sacrifice coarse athletic effects to the justified demands of style and expression.



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