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Self Perception and Performance Reality

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A young man comes on stage to perform Dichterliebe. He loves the poetry and he respects the music. He feels them both deeply, and he wants to convey to his listeners the strong emotion he experiences as he sings one of his favorite works. He perceives himself as the medium for interpreting this wonderful amalgamation of text and musical sensibility, and he understands that he must portray an earnest but not entirely happy lover. In his mind's eye he knows how that person should look, and he is certain that his portrayal is successful.

What his audience sees, however, is a young man attempting to choreograph romantic expression through constant body and head movement, and through distressed facial expression. The musical line shows similar instability as it becomes lost in correspondingly tortured detail and exaggerated musical nuance. The singer who had intended to display to his audience great depth of feeling and personal empathy with Heine and Schumann comes across instead as a naïve fellow, publicly wallowing in his own emotion. The internal image he has of himself does not match the actual image he externally displays. Why? Because he has never seen himself perform. He assumes that he looks like what he feels.

Some singers refuse to watch themselves in the mirror. "It distracts me to look at myself while I am singing!" Others refuse the aid of the video camera, and cringe when seeing a playback. "But I didn't think I was doing *that*. I look awful on tape!" It is clear that the same singer will "look awful" on stage to viewers as well. The public sees not what the singer imagines he or she looks like while singing, but actual appearance. The singer should know what that is. Performance itself will not bring about radical improvement.

Visual aspects of public performance are almost as important as are the audio. Unlike the instrumentalist, the singer does not bring an external instrument onto the stage, then hold it, or sit before it or around it, in order to play it. The singer's body is the instrument.

Physical behavior on stage must be as controllable as vocal behavior; in fact, the two are inseparable. Just as the sounds of singing must be disciplined to become repeatable vocal maneuvers, so must attitudes of the physical instrument. Involuntary rocking, weaving, swaying, raising and lowering the head, gyrating the torso, and gesticulating, have direct effects upon the production of vocal sound.

It is for this reason that every singer, professional or student, should have access to

video equipment in preparation for public performance. When standing before the public, the singer will then know with reasonable assurance what the body and the face are registering, because the results of the vocalism utilized will already have been seen. Feeling and imagining are insufficient guarantees that the physical responses of the body are properly conveying desired emotions to the public .

One might ask why contemporary performance preparation should extend beyond the means available to artists of the past. That is a bit like asking why people drive automobiles instead of horse-drawn carriages. Although the eye of the listener has always taken in as much as the ear, today's performer must operate in an arena with even greater visual orientation than was the case in previous decades. A singer must, in every performance, match the internal perception of the performance with the physical behavior the audience perceives.

The video camera is one of the most important pedagogical tools available to modern vocal pedagogy. To ignore its potential is to deny the singer a major assist in establishing performance competence and security. Visual feedback makes it possible for the singer to be rid of extraneous, idiosyncratic, and superficial movement, and to avoid appearing self-indulgent and awkward in interpretation and communication. The performing instrument (the body) and the vocal sound are more readily united in the manner the singer envisions. Performance self-image takes on reality.