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Easily, not Lazily (Tonicity in the Singing Instrument)

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Voice teachers are right to guard against "pushing" voices. "Pushing" produces tensions that result from pressed phonation, an excessively long closure phase of the vocal folds in response to high airflow and high rates of subglottic pressure. In attempting to sufficiently energize the body in order to meet the demands of long phrases, high-lying tessitura, and intensity levels, some singers induce too much laryngeal resistance. Indeed, the most basic consideration in vocal pedagogy is how to teach a proper balance between freedom and energization.

Although the vocal instrument can be viewed in several ways, one of the most convenient points of departure is to consider it an aerodynamic/myoelastic instrument, as Janwillem van den Berg advised several decades ago. That is, the muscular vocal mechanism functions in response to air pressures. There must be fine coordination between the power source (the breath—the aerodynamic motor) and the vibrating source (the myoelastic instrument). A lot of pedagogical language addresses itself to achieving the most efficient way to combine these two factors. (Their relationship with the supraglottic resonator system—an equally important part of the total mechanism—is not part of this brief discussion.)

"Pressed phonation" describes excessive laryngeal closure in response to airflow. "Flow phonation" (also sometimes termed "free flow phonation") should describe the proper supply of breath for the needs of the phonatory tasks. Certainly, the wise teacher of singing should search for freely flowing phonation, and work against pressed, forced phonation.

But it is exactly at this point in vocal pedagogy where some counter-productive factors from excellent intentions may enter in. This is because excess air passing over the vocal folds is not conducive either to stable vocal timbre or to healthy phonation. Yet, some teachers, in the hope of reducing valvular tension at the level of the larynx, induce a too-high airflow rate. They mistakenly assume that the extent of the closure phase of the rapidly adducting and abducting glottis is identical to that in speech mode. In so doing, they fail to take into account the parameters of tessitura, range, intensity, and duration of the breath cycle required for singing.

When the laryngeal valve is too tightly occluded, with an excessive glottal closure

phase, it is possible to induce “flow phonation” by momentarily requesting a sigh (which produces rapid airflow), or even through suggesting a “relaxing” yawn. However, both devices, associated with physical weariness, carry the peril of substituting breathy phonation for proper balance between airflow and laryngeal response. The same distortions that are audible in “singing speech” and in “yawning speech” are then even more marked in the sung vocal timbre.

A far more useful technique is to solidify the exactitude of vocal fold approximation and air flow through the discipline of the onset (the “attack”) and the release. The latter is not only the termination of the phonation but also the renewal of breath energy through a subsequent, immediate inhalatory gesture. The tonicity of the singing instrument is thereby maintained. One can apply energy with ease, but one cannot sing lazily and expect good results.