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## Si canta come si parla?

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**S**i canta come si parla ("one sings as one speaks") is a familiar adage from the historic Italian School, the school that for several centuries dominated all serious vocalism in the Western world.

Can it really be true that one sings as one speaks? A considered answer to that question might well be, "It depends on which language one is singing, how clearly one enunciates it, and in what part of the vocal range one is singing."

The singing voice does not exist independent of the speech mechanism. Problems of the singing voice frequently are directly attributable to poor speech production. A singer may suffer more fatigue from improper speech habits than from an inadequate singing technique. Yet people who learn to use the speaking voice well may nevertheless sing badly. It surprises some listeners that a "resonant" speaker may not have an equally resonant quality in the singing voice.

Most speaking ranges encompass less than half the fully developed singing range. Many pitches routinely used in singing cannot possibly be delivered in speech. Then how does si canta come si parla have validity as a pedagogical tenet in the cultivated singing voice?

The acoustic theory of speech production and linguistic recognition is in large part based upon the assumption that vowel definition results from proper correspondence between laryngeal configuration and the filtering processes of resonator adjustment above the larynx. If vowel definition, as identified by specific phonetic postures, is displayed, "vowel tracking" of the laryngeally produced sound must take place within the resonator tract. In accomplishing such "acoustic tracking" of the vowel, the physical and acoustic principles that contribute to ideal speech intelligibility must also be present in singing. In this regard, si canta come si parla.

A very real problem exists for the singer, in that the distinct physical positions for phonemes described by the phonetician are not uniformly present in most spoken language. Further, the variety of vowels in such languages as English, French, and German far exceed the seven vowels found in Italian: [i e ε α ɔ o u]. In languages with numerous vowel variations and with a high rate of diphthongization, the precise vowel postures identified in the phonetic books scarcely exist in practice: transition sounds – on-glides and off-glides – are characteristic of speech.

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In singing, in contrast, because of the duration factor, phonetic precision in vowel definition is attainable in any language. Such physiological and acoustical exactitude underlies the rubric *si canta come si parla*.

There are, however, attitudes toward singing technique based upon the conviction that the singing instrument is independent of the speaking instrument; elaborate systems have been erected that actually avoid speech-like coordinations in favor of “learned” laryngeal and vocal tract positioning for singing. In these techniques, the singer practices avoidance of the flexible postures of speech in favor of a pre-set “ideal” form of resonator coupling. Of course, if the singer has been taught that the voice is best produced in a set mold of the mouth regardless of the vowel or the pitch to be sung, the relationship between larynx and vocal tract during a series of vowels will be drastically altered. In any case, if the conviction is that one ideal position for singing must be established, whether through a lateral [i] (“ee”) buccal posture as in the smile, or by an exaggerated [α] (“ah”) posture, as with the excessively lowered mandible, or with the rounded [ɔ] (“aw”) shape, acoustic imbalances will exist between the laryngeally generated sound and the vocal-tract filtering system during any sequence of vowel sounds. In such theories of voice production, the notion that *si canta come si parla* is patently rejected.

To some extent, historical schools of singing can be described by their varying attitudes toward the functional relationships between the speaking and singing voices. Even the choice of vowels for vocalization purposes (the preference for back as opposed to front vowels, or the reverse, or the predilection for the “mixed vowel” sounds) may be traced to the presence or absence of

complex vowel formations in the language, as well as to aesthetic orientations toward certain vocal colorations. These partialities are most telling in the extreme ranges, both upper and lower, of the singing voice.

It is doubtful that teachers in the historic international school ever looked for identical postures between sung and spoken vowel formations in any range of the voice. Rigid adherence to imitative buccal opening experienced in the speaking voice was probably never the intent of the admonition “to sing as one speaks.” Assuredly, however, the distended perpendicular posture of the mouth, or the rounded “pout” of the lips seen in some current techniques of singing cannot be in agreement with the older tenet, nor with what is known about the acoustic process of voiced communication. *Raccogliere la bocca* (“collect the mouth”) is a concept closely related to *si canta come si parla*, and was expressly intended as a counterbalance to too much vertical jaw and mouth action, and does not refer to some general protrusion of the lips throughout the vowel series.

In the sequence of vowels, from the front through the neutral to the back vowels and their neighbors, the buccal cavity progresses from lateral through perpendicular to rounded postures, with the mouth being most opened on the [α] (“ah”). As the level of breath energy increases, and as pitch and volume rise in the speaking voice, the mouth will open farther. In both speech and singing, as the scale mounts the mouth tends to open wider, although the relative relationships among the vowels remain. This process is a major device for achieving desirable “vowel modification” in the upper register of the singing voice and for producing the even scale.

Singing in the upper extremes of the voice will entail the same increase in buccal opening as will other forms of heightened voiced expression, for example, laughter or calling. However, to maintain in the middle and lower singing ranges the same open mouth position which is appropriate to the upper range has no more purpose than such a posture would have in the low range of the speaking voice. (In singing the very lowest pitches that lie below the normal speech-inflection range, additional buccal opening may be desirable.) Uniform vocal timbre throughout the scale is not achieved by maintaining one buccal posture – or something close to it – because vowel definition results from acoustic positions that alter with changing vowel shapes, pitch and dynamic levels. Any “unification” of the vocal scale that avoids flexibility of vowel definition causes a common quality of distortion. If, as so often is the case, a singer experiences jaw tension because of a set mouth posture – generally with the jaw dropped too far – momentarily lightly shifting the jaw in quick, brief lateral or circular movements will release the jaw from the fixed position. (Such lateral or circular movements are not continued during speech or singing, of course.)

To a large extent, then, the old adage *si canta come si parla* is firmly based upon subsequent phonetic findings of the scientific age, with regard to acoustic factors. Of course that advice is not in opposition to the equally strong dictum “*portare la voce*” (“carry the voice”) upon which the essential art of legato is premised. In a language free of diphthongization and without percussive inflection, as is the case with Italian, the two historic concepts (“sing as you speak / carry the voice”) are not inimical. Indeed, legato singing is possible only when the enuncia-

tory principle is economically realized (as in *raccogliere la bocca*).

It is possible to sing the many sounds of any language with the same phonetic principles by which the Italian language can be managed. The high incidence of consonant clustering in some languages, specifically German, English and some Eastern European languages, need not interfere with good vowel definition so long as transition sounds stemming from those consonantal events are avoided. (Good singers have already learned to eliminate regional speech habits in singing.) Most transition sound is caused by inappropriate attempts to return to a distended mouth posture when the vowel and the pitch in question do not tolerate that kind of motion. Clarity of timbre, clean diction, and legato line are then inevitably disturbed.

*Si canta come si parla* continues to have important contemporary pedagogical application. The maxim stands in direct opposition to techniques that endorse either excessively mechanistic or misinformed approaches to resonator adjustment for the singing voice. ■

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*Rhythmus ist das einzige, was musikalisch nicht gebildete Ohren in einem Tonstück fühlen und begreifen können.*

*Johann Nikolaus Forkel*

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