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## Establishing or Altering a Tonal Concept

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**Question:** How does a singer arrive at a tonal concept, and how can it be established or altered?

**Comment:** This thoughtful question regarding the establishment of tonal concepts enters directly into the psychology of teaching and learning. Were a full and complete answer to this question readily found, the teaching of singing would become a much easier profession.

Most singers are drawn to the art of singing by hearing beautiful timbre and artistry from some model or models whom they have come to admire. Although the means of artistic communication are fairly discernible, no one can clarify with exactitude how the brain establishes an aesthetic goal, or why one tonal concept becomes preferable to the exclusion of others.

Cultural milieu plays a role, but environment alone cannot explain why an individual may choose to accept, reject, or modify a specific aesthetic aim. With regard to form and structure, the elements of music are far more identifiable – and universally agreed to – than is the quality of sound, that is, what constitutes ideal timbre. Nowhere is this more the case than with the classical vocalist.

Perhaps the chief task of a teacher of singing is to devise and articulate a pathway that will help an individual performer harness

physical and acoustic maneuvers so as to produce the optimal sound for that particular voice. Is the current timbre the result of freely-produced vocalism, or is it dependent on superimposed concepts of tone that are inappropriate to the instrument itself? If there are changes to be made, how will they be defined and conveyed?

Most accomplished singers possess amazingly good imitative powers. By conceiving a particular timbre and bringing it to realization by altering the vocal tract, they are able, with amazing accuracy, to mimic other singers, even those of another Fach. Imitative alterations may include: placing the tongue in positions that, for that particular singer, are nonphonetic postures; hanging, clenching, or distorting the jaw; assisting or disrupting the vibrato rate; introducing degrees of nasality; stiffening the velum; spreading the pharyngeal wall; or even shifting the position of the larynx itself. Applying disparate approaches to the control of subglottic pressure can also alter vocal fold resistance to air flow and contribute to striking tonal differences. Stylistic idiosyncrasies also offer a field day for the talented singer/mimic.

Such imitative ability may, of course, be put to positive use. Indeed, imitation can be part of the teacher's own effective arsenal. Although a singer/teacher must be careful never to imitate destructive vocalism, brief demonstrations of the differences between desirable and undesirable timbre, accurate

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and inaccurate vowel definition, shades of vowel modification in upper range, and degrees of nasality can all be safely undertaken, often with astounding assistance in developing a student's ear for the fine differences that exist between what is less good, what is very good, and what is excellent.

The problem for the student with a fine ear for timbre discrimination and with a colorful imagination is that the imitative ear may work against that singer in finding his or her own native timbre; the student may be producing an imitative sound that imperils the welfare of his or her native instrument. A young singer or an older, problematic singer may base a concept of ideal voice timbre on an admired, mature, premier artist, who by no means achieves voice quality through such means of distortion as the imitator assumes. The uninformed, imitative ear may, on occasion, induce good functional results, but, more frequently, it prompts compensatory adjustments that are foreign to a singer's own structure.

Often, a wonderful young voice shows professional potential but remains difficult to manage because of technical deficiency. A portion of that singer's tonal concept (or its application to a particular segment of the scale) maybe in accordance with good physical function, while other aspects of it are inhibitive.

What can serve as the lodestar for guiding the musical ear to conceive of a liberated vocal sound and to accept that sound as a new tonal ideal? The answer lies in freedom of function. Unless there are voice pathologies present, or habits of misuse or abuse, the singer already uses the voice with a certain level of freedom when speaking. That same liberation is transferable to the voice of singing: the healthy speaking voice is parent of the singing voice.

There should be no more distortion in sung timbre than in spoken quality. (That is not the same as saying there are no differences between singing and speaking.) On the other hand, just as some athletes come

more naturally to physical coordination appropriate to specialized sports tasks, so do some singers with regard to freely produced vocalism. But the schooling of the vocal athlete is no less involved than is the training of other athletes.

When the three parts of the vocal instrument-motor, vibrator, and resonator-are in proper synchronization, the timbre appropriate to the individual voice emerges. Timbre does not need to be created to meet some preconceived notion; it needs to be freed. That is why it is crucial that principles of voice instruction be in accordance with the voice as a physical and acoustic instrument.

The problem may be that the student and the teacher, feeling the pressure of time, come to rely on quick solutions, indiscriminately trying out various ideas floating about in the vast, uncharted, pedagogic reservoir. In the process, one compensatory function may be replaced or augmented by another. This, then, becomes a matter of technical overlay, not of technical solution.

It is the job of the singing teacher to recognize which sounds, produced by the student, come closest to unhampered vocalism and to identify others that fall short. Then begins the diagnostic process of locating the causes of malfunction and of prescribing precise solutions. This is not accomplished by superimposing some generic tonal ideal on all singers, but by listening for the individuality of each instrument. There will always be some note or notes in any singing voice that are better produced than others. It is on these promising sounds that an individualized tonal concept can be constructed.

A student cannot respond with beautiful timbre simply by becoming aware of existing tensions and recognizing the need to eliminate them. Old muscle habits have to be abandoned, new pathways routinized. While every student has the right to experience constant progress, there is no discoverable magic muscle that, when

touched, will immediately solve all difficulties. Persistence in removing the impediments to good tone and in building new concepts is as essential to both teacher and student as is the development of an alert and freshly discriminating ear.

A change in tonal concept cannot be suddenly accomplished. It can happen only if the singer is convinced that what is to come is better than what is to be given up. No one has the right to tell another person that one sound is preferable to another unless logical support for the new concept can be clearly enunciated, and the differences between

productions of the two tonal concepts can be heard, felt, or seen.

It may not be easy to convince the singer of the necessity to give up falsely induced controls. Those very imposed controls produced a tonal ideal that the singer previously associated with skilled vocalism, and for which some approbation probably has already been received. Yet, when freedom is experienced through improved production, the new timbre as a preferable tonal ideal will gradually take over from the old. That which is most freely produced will become aesthetically most pleasing. 📖