

## Concerning Vowels

What is an 'A'? I have struggled with this for the whole life of learning to sing, and I am still learning. I come from a Minnesota 'A', which is flat, nasal and friendly.

Why do Italians have such resonant 'A's?

The Swiss 'A' is definitely very pushed down with the tongue in the throat, whereas our Minnesota A is characterized by a high larynx, making a bright penetrating timbre.

Italian throats are so simply configured – just 5 basic vowel sounds with some modifications on the 'E' and 'O', all of which fills me with envy! I study the TV and radio announcers on the RAI. Their lips move sideways and forward quickly to keep up the pace of their sentences – and I hear basically nothing in the back of the mouth, it's all resonating near the teeth, and in the larynx itself. I visualize their facial muscles, able to capture the sound into the tissues and bones of the masque. Just speaking the Italian language places the voice in a very different area. In fact, when I speak English or German for a while, I definitely have to readjust my facial configuration to sound the way I like.

It is a basic misconception, that to avoid the 'throaty' sound', one shouldn't feel anything at all there. No, there is a difference between 'throaty' and a vibrant larynx.

In fact the tongue can add a very velvety, warm vibration, if it's not hard and stiff at the back. The tongue is the other name for 'language', in the latin languages, 'lingua', 'lingue', means 'language'. It follows that the tongue must have a major role in a singer's timbre – even very slight changes in height, the high curve slightly more forward or back can make the difference between constriction and ease. It is the lever for resonance and for harmonics.

When the larynx is properly sitting low, it feels compressed and fleshy. I can put a lot more breath pressure under it, which causes it to vibrate more, and is very efficient. 'Efficient' meaning that the breath gets converted completely into sound, with no escaping hiss. The study of breath pressure is complex for those who don't have the ability naturally. Connecting downward is a concept so foreign for the modern generation, who are used to understanding things mainly with their heads. We have to learn to expel breath with resistance, and from a lower area in the torso, and sometimes we use higher pressure from the chest as well! It takes time, and is hard to get across to young singers. The only way for them to get it is to try, experiment, and find out in their own original way.

I try to describe what I feel, zeroing in on the various parts of my head, throat, body, jaw, tongue, etc. And sometimes just demonstrating well does the best job of communication. My students tell me they appreciate it, that I can demonstrate the way I'd like them to go.

An 'A' vowel is scary, because as a non-Italian, it is so far from what our throats are used to. Students describe the 'A' as having no borders, no interior sense of vibration, difficult to anchor on the lower torso, difficult to feel anything at all! 'E' is so much easier, one readily feels something in the masque, forward in the mouth, so sure and secure!

## **Concerning Singers**

No one who doesn't sing can imagine what this study entails. What normal mortal feels what shape his tongue feels like in his mouth, what a high harmonic feels like above the head, what a low diaphragm feels like and how that changes the sound?

The study of singing is to study internal aerodynamics, and feel a kind of geometry as sound is created, a geometry of vibration which is subjectively recognizable during the act of singing.

I do not pretend to be very scientific, although I have looked in the very interesting recent books, and heard lectures coming from the researchers on vocal studies.

There are so many ways to approach this study. Most young students have no idea what sounds good, what is the feeling of 'the good sound'. They have to learn to focus on the inside workings of the mouth, palate, the uvula, study every possible tension in the throat, neck, torso, scalp, and how it affects timbre. Breath pressure, from where it comes, higher or lower in the torso, Then learn how to displace the vibration from one part of the head to another, how to increase breath pressure without forcing, and all of this accompanied by the basic drive which is love of the music and not to divorce oneself from the desire to express oneself musically.

Then at some point one can let go, the technique resulting from the hours and years of practice has become reliable and stable, one can finally be spontaneous and hook on to the level of emotion, and one is on the way to become an artist!

I may add, that this process never ends, the discoveries are infinite, one is never the same two days in a row. It means that every day needs to be a day of study, because the technique in a 20-year old throat will not be the same any more in a 30 or 40 year old one, the body will be different, the weight distributed differently. If everything goes well, one continues to grow and get better with the years!

Every musician knows how wonderful it is to play or sing a piece one knows for 20 years. The levels of interpretation and communication get so rich, so surprising to oneself and to the public.

## **Why Italians have rich resonance.**

If I compare the personalities of Swiss and Italians, the Northern character is, to say it as it is – more honesty, less fantasy. Italians hold 80% back from what they are thinking. Does this have an influence on the resonance? If I just blare out and hold back nothing, I don't develop nearly as much resonance.