

Ingo Titze, Associate Editor

Concone's Thirty Daily Exercises— An Interesting Variation

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I WAS INTRODUCED TO Concone's Thirty Daily Exercises about forty years ago. For a stretch of years I practiced them daily, but like many other impatient singers I never quite made it to Exercise 30 on a regular basis. Sometimes I started at the end and went backwards, but it was clear that Concone intended them to be progressive from front to back. Exercises 1–15 warmed me up to be successful with 16–30.

But the biggest problem was No. 1, the *mesa di voce* exercise. I always felt it was too demanding to be used as the initial vocalise in a warm-up. Hence, I usually began with No. 2, an ascending scale. I was most successful with the *mesa di voce* at the end of the exercise routine, but that was at least 15–20 minutes into the warm-up session. Then I was too eager to get into songs.

For many years, I drifted away from Concone and took bits and pieces from many other exercise books. In particular, the semiocluded vocal tract exercises (lip and tongue trills, nasals, straw phonation, etc.) have so dominated my thinking and exploring in recent years that exercises for technical skill (doublets, triplets, grace notes, trills) in Concone took second place. And then there was the problem of vowel-pitch interaction that is not specifically addressed in the Concone's basic exercises. Most singers default to an /a/, but feel they should not neglect the other vowels. Since most of the exercises are repeated in semitone intervals, there is adequate opportunity to permute through the basic vowel set /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, /u/. But as high pitches are executed, a selected vowel cannot be held constant for most singers. Concone does not address the vowel modification strategies. So techniques incorporated from other exercises and vocalises are imported by many singing teachers to introduce the pitch-vowel modification needed for basic skills exercises like those of Concone.

So, why the renewed interest in Concone's exercises? A few years ago I attempted to execute them all with phonation into a straw. It seemed impossible at first, but in a matter of a few days I could do at least the first half of them. The initial difficulty was clearly separating individual notes, particularly in rapid scales or arpeggios. The individual note accents had to be produced with the respiratory muscles, that is, by abdominal pulsations. This seemed laborious, but ultimately manageable. Accenting notes with increased vocal fold adduction seemed not to work, which after much pondering I now believe is the value of the whole new exploration.

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Phonation into a thin straw accomplishes automatically what laryngeal muscle action is supposed to accomplish in *messa di voce*: to separate (abduct) the vocal folds slightly during a crescendo. Why is this important? To keep voice quality (vocal timbre) constant. If the vocal folds are held in a constant position (or even adducted) during a crescendo, the greater amplitude of vibration will cause more collision, measured by a greater closed quotient in the glottis. This greater closed quotient changes the spectrum of harmonic frequencies produced, resulting in a changing timbre from soft voice to loud voice. Some of this can be tolerated, but not to the point that soft voice becomes breathy and weak in harmonic content and loud voice becomes pressed. By phonating into a thin straw, an oral pressure is built up that is proportional to lung pressure. This oral pressure is also transferred to the glottis and pushes the vocal folds apart slightly. Since loudness in the crescendo is controlled by lung pressure, there is now an automatic compensation (via a slight abduction) for increased loudness. The *messa di voce* with a straw becomes a vehicle for “getting the feel” of what should happen in a more challenging situation where the mouth is wide open. Stated differently, it helps to train the feeling of mixed register—neither too little adduction as in falsetto or breathy voice, or too much adduction as in pressed voice. By keeping adduction more neutral and constant, the abdominal musculature must take over to control loudness and note accent. It takes much of the load off the vocal folds. Ultimately, of course, the intrinsic muscles of the larynx still have to learn to do it on their own (without the straw), but the “reference sensation” has been established.

With the straw, I can now do Concone No. 1 as the first exercise in a warm-up, and I often progress well into the remaining exercises before I lay down the straw. My only wish is that I could have discussed this variation with the author himself, and other teachers in the era of great vocal enlightenment (late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries).

REFERENCE

Concone, Giuseppe. *30 Daily Exercises, Op. 11*. New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1986.

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