

Ingo Titze, Associate Editor

Some Reflections on Speech-Like Singing and Related Contemporary Approaches

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THE ATTEMPT TO MAKE SINGING MORE SPEECH-LIKE is not new. Story telling with extended melodic and rhythmic variations is probably as old as either music or speech itself. It is simply a matter of preference whether the musical message or the verbal message dominates in the view of the composer and the performer. However, when vocal music is unamplified (electronically) and delivered to large audiences, choices have to be made about how well the sound carries to the listener. Acoustic power becomes the most important requirement, with word intelligibility often having to play a secondary role. On the other hand, when vocal music is amplified, either for recording or live performance, vocal power emanating from the mouth of the performer is only a perception and may not be significant at all at the production end. Voices can appear powerful while emphasis is placed on diction, variety of tone color, or a large pitch range.

It is strange that singing teachers argue about this dichotomy in terms of right or wrong technique. Classical singing is not “affected,” “unnatural,” “stiff,” or “manufactured” when viewed in light of the acoustic requirement. Speech-like singing is not “weak,” “unrefined,” or “lacking in timbre” if the electronic processing of the sound is considered part of the instrument. Jimi Hendrix made a percussive guitar tone into a sustained tone by using amplification feedback. The guitar-microphone-amplifier-loudspeaker combination became a new instrument. The final sound was not just the sound of the plucked guitar string amplified, but the sound of a string driven by the amplification.

Training voices for contemporary commercial music (CCM) has a different set of priorities than classical singing training. Basically, one trains what can least be supplied by electronic means: a wide pitch range and a voice registration that is not easily disrupted by consonants or speech-like vowels. Vocal endurance is also a major factor, given that the industry paces the singer with many performances, recordings, and interviews. These requirements point to mixed registration as a survival technique. Semiocluded vocal tract exercises (lip trills, closed vowels, straw or tube phonation, etc.) are becoming popular in CCM training because they promote mixed registration at a moderate loudness. Sound power is not the issue. Furthermore, vibrato, ring, or other tone features can be produced or removed electronically.

This, then, invites the question: Can training for sound production with amplification be used effectively for unamplified singing? Is it only a matter of using more lung pressure or more breath support? My personal experience in

practicing exercises from both training camps compels me to answer with a cautious no. Practicing many days with exercises that widen my pitch range, maintaining medium loudness with mixed registration as the primary objective, tends to weaken my vibrato and reduce loudness range previously attained with vocal ring. On the other end of the spectrum, focusing on an operatic production with vibrato and ring (usually obtained easiest in a mid-range of pitch) limited my ability to reach notes outside an approximate two-octave pitch range. It seems that, at least in my instrument, some physiological trade-offs occur.

I am beginning to feel my age, however. Thanks to technology, I can see my slightly bowed vocal folds. I wish I could have had the chance to do this informal experiment 40 years ago. Perhaps my personal discoveries are totally meaningless for a young, healthy voice. It is important to note, however, that acoustic priorities guide what our laryngeal and respiratory muscles will produce. A sprinter does not easily convert to a marathon runner, regardless of the youth or health he or she possesses.

I would love to hear from readers about their experiences in vocal cross-training. Perhaps we can rebut all of this in a follow-up column. It would really be exciting

to know if the laryngeal motor system can retain all the features of one production if practice and performance are mostly centered on the other production.

Ingo R. Titze is Distinguished Professor of Speech Science and Voice at the University of Iowa and Executive Director of the National Center for Voice and Speech at the University of Utah. His formal education is in physics and electrical engineering, but he has devoted much of his studies to vocal music and speech. Dr. Titze has published more than 400 articles in scientific and educational journals, coedited two books titled *Vocal Fold Physiology*, and now has three books in print: *Principles of Voice Production*, *The Myoelastic Aerodynamic Theory of Phonation*, and *Fascinations with the Human Voice*. He has lectured throughout the world and has appeared on such educational television series as *Innovation*, *Quantum*, and *Beyond 2000*. He is a recipient of the William and Harriott Gould Award for laryngeal physiology, the Jacob Javits Neuroscience Investigation Award, the Claude Pepper Award, the Quintana Award, and the American Laryngological Association Award. He is a Fellow and a Silver Medalist of the Acoustical Society of America, and a Fellow of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. Dr. Titze has served on a number of national advisory boards and scientific review groups, including the Scientific Advisory Board of the Voice Foundation and the Division of Research Grants of the National Institutes of Health. In addition to his scientific endeavors, Dr. Titze continues to be active as a singer. He is married to Kathy Titze and has four children and eight grandchildren. Mail should be addressed to Ingo R. Titze, National Center for Voice and Speech, 330 WJSHC, Iowa City, IA 52242. Telephone (319) 335-6600.



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