

The singing being

We are not dealing here with good or bad techniques, but with the notion of vocal, corporeal or breathing behaviour each of which is either adapted or unadapted to a given expression, a literary text, an acoustical context, a related situation, an intention, or even the spontaneity of the moment.

The different vocal techniques used throughout the world often correspond to a specific situation or context whether it be social, cultural, professional, religious or linked to habitat or climate. These techniques are then transmitted by oral tradition, initiation, learned transmission, or are an improvised attempt to adapt to circumstances, to a space, to a "here and now" creation.

A society is partially represented by its music (music of the language, the musical quality of the voice, music of the social, emotional and relational life). Music is an expression on many levels, of the characteristics of the group who create it : its morphology, geographic locality, its type of activity, the relationship with the animal and vegetable world and with the natural elements of water, earth, air and fire. It is also the expression of the type of relationship between individuals and of course the relationship between man and the supernatural, i.e. religious feeling.

The freedom of a well-adjusted and genuine response

Singing is always the expression of these ethnic specificities. Primitive societies in which collective work is predominant (agriculture, hunting, fishing) and where social life flourishes, have developed collective singing, their activity expressed by the movements and rhythms of the body, and linked to the environment and times of day. During these songs, every voice blends into the collective harmony.

Social evolution entailed the development of individuality and the development of representation and exchange between human groups. Singing followed this evolution and by branching out from the collective form of expression became more individual. Thus singing became representational, was used as a form of communication, a means of social and religious message.

The movement of the body and its projection in space, and from the surrounding environment. Song is now often inspired by emotion, or by a more cerebral aspect where voice becomes a permanent expression of what "I am", "me" as distinct, individual, needing to be attended to and taken care of. This is the expression of my person, its dilatations, retractions, limits and habits ; "singing" and "my voice" search for each other, upset each other, lose each other in their search of a "technique", a reassuring prop, a delimitation.

Never as today has the search for voice been so prevalent, as if it belonged to the intangible, to the realm of the unexpressed, as if it were a reality to be lived out at the instant of its existence, in the coherence of its production, in its truth as an adapted and authentic response to an external or exterior stimulus.

It is a question of finding out whether my body, my thoughts, my breathing are free to respond in an authentic and adapted way. It is not a question of trying to determine what is good or bad for my voice, of drawing up an endless list of things imperative or forbidden. For in many cases, the study of the different vocal techniques used throughout the world will

only jeopardize the certainty as to the soundness of such and such a demarcated idea or concept.

I shall quote a few examples:

- The glottal catch used in many vocal traditions, such as in Northern Africa,
- The yodel of mountain folk with that fully attested passing of the voice from head to chest,
- The throat singing found in those countries where space must be crossed, as that of the singing of the Basque shepherds or of the Berbers,
- The strong tremolo in the singing of Korean women, which, under strong pressure, releases the larynx dynamically,
- The open throat of the Fado women singers, their faces like figureheads and their hands nervously fingering the traditional black shawl,
- The nasal singing of Southern Italian popular singers,
- The extreme depth of the voice in the Japanese tradition.

The singer in touch with its being

Each specific type of aesthetics conditions the art of singing and the manner in which it is used. A series of rules are subsequently set down according to which the singer develops and concentrates on certain aspects of the voice, often exclusively concerned with the resonance of the voice, its support, its muscular tone, and articulation.

If we take as an example the heritage of classical singing of the 19th century which is often claimed to have expressed the correct and healthy utilisation of the vocal organ and its pneumophonic dynamics, we can see that the specifications of classical singing might lead the singer to indulge in the exaggeration of a particular kind of muscular development, of specific bodily organisation and breathing dynamics, and to a use of resonance in its own right.

In my opinion this specificity is linked to :

- a search for homogeneity of timbre throughout the voice's tessitura, a point where many other sets of aesthetics would favour a change of register along with the development and expansion of harmonic areas chosen according to pitch.
- The possibility of performing a crescendo or a diminuendo on any note of the tessitura.
- The capacity to sing with equal roundedness and homogeneity all vowels on each note ; most vocal traditions choose certain vowels specifically for vocalizing, vowels whose openness and impact on the vocal chords are favourable for the production of sound thus allowing an acoustic realisation of the phenomenon.

The acquisition of any given technique within any given set of aesthetics, includes the true awareness of the body which is singing, the body ("my" body) used as an instrument with its structure, its mechanisms and its biodynamics. It also includes an awareness of the body's possibilities and limitations due to the configuration of the skeleton, which enables its movement, and finally of the functioning of the cerebral cortex (which governs the muscles).

There is also the discovery by sensation of the laws of physics (the field of mechanical gravitation of solids and fluids - the air column -) and of acoustic laws (the propagation of sounds, the development of harmonics...) characteristic of the environment in which one evolves and expresses oneself.

Self image

As Moshe Feldenkrais says in his work on « Conscious Awareness through Movement »: « each person regulates his behaviour, physically and mentally according to the image he has of himself » (conscious image and unconscious representation for the cortex). This image of the self is a corporeal image, with contours, with the relation between limbs and other areas of the body (relations of time and space), and with notions of spaces (which will become the breathing and resonance areas). This image is also an image of feeling, emotion and thought. The formation of the image comes about according to the evolution, education and personal history of the individual.

When striking an attitude, adopting a posture, bursting out in an expression of oneself, in vocal dynamics, each person presents a totally personal configuration which is felt to be the easiest, the most natural ; it is often felt as an impression of doing nothing in particular ("I'm not doing anything special", the student often says, "for me this is natural").

The usual configurations are therefore deeply imprinted in the nervous system which reacts to external stimuli with a ready answer, an attitude or habit, and is so often incapable of providing another answer in order to correspond to external reality, in other words, incapable of adapting to a given context, situation, acoustic, expression or intention.

It is a question of releasing the nervous system of its compulsive configurations by means of the dynamic change we are considering, and thus to allow for a mode of action and reaction dictated not by habit but a given situation.

There is no ideal jaw position

Let us take a concrete example to illustrate this theory : the position of the jaw and its dynamics for the "singer". Each individual presents an apparent, specific and usual morphology often criticised by the teacher ("don't clench your teeth", "don't open the jaw to that extent", "you're bringing the jaw too far forward and it is upsetting the voice", etc...). The jaw's position is linked to the state of relaxation, retraction of the muscles which attach the lower jaw to the neighbouring areas (upper jaw, clavicle, and sternum, the cervical region of the spine...).

This attitude can be a reaction (that is to say, a response of the moment to a relational and contextual situation i.e. a feeling of aggression, the expression of anxiety), usual (corresponding to an image of the self brought about by the individual's history) or acquired (a particular configuration demanded by a specific technique after training where often there is imitation or modelling, or which is the fruit of learning).

If one considers on the one hand the acoustic laws which determine the development of harmonics and the propagation of sound, and on the other, the functional relation between the lower jaw and the larynx (that is to say, the source of vibration), it is obvious that there exists no ideal position of the jaw.

The position will be found to vary according to pitch, intensity, to the vowel sound pronounced and to the desired vocal colour. The lower jaw must at all times, and in every vocal situation, in its relation to the upper jaw, the larynx and the cervical region of the spine, define an equilibrium, adapted, harmonious and free.

This means that the nervous system in its capacity as the commanding organ, must be able to program a response adapted to the acoustic situation of the moment, to command the necessary muscular effort.

In order to do this, it must be freed of compulsive and habit-formed configurations, and relaxes (that is to say, free from syncinetic commands, unconscious and involuntary tension) and able to carry out a morphologically specific configuration. This presupposes an experimentation and memory-integration of a vast number of possibilities which can subsequently be associated in different ways thus enabling an adapted response to external stimuli. The richer one is in possibilities, the more chances we have of finding within oneself the required response. If one knows only one configuration, whether good or bad, habitual or acquired, the response will in most cases be unadapted, unharmonious and limited. It is only adapted behaviour, with minimum effort that will allow free expression, a harmonic richness of sound and the perfect definition of the vowel in clear and precise articulation.

Trying out an array of possibilities and listing out for the differences

If a student when singing has a physical attitude (for instance, the position of the jaw) which obviously impedes the emission of sound and of the harmonic quality of the vowel, I do not suggest some external model, another position of the jaw (a so-called "good position", a mould which he would have to train himself into in front of a mirror) ; but rather, try out with him a large number of possibilities for the position of his jaw and its relation to other areas of the body, all this while listening to the modification of his sound due to these morphological changes (including the unadapted attitudes which limit or impede), he can thus register the difference himself.

I would like to quote an Chinese proverb : *"It is by exhausting every manner of walking crookedly that a man will end up by walking straight"* ("straight" not in relation to an outside model, but in relation to himself at any given moment). This experimentation with no prior choices is the characteristic of a child's apprenticeship which leads him to maturity ; similarly, the student can rid his nervous system of fixed habits and create a new image of himself (in every area), a richer image, clearer and more complete. As we have already said, this image will then regulate behaviour until it becomes increasingly adapted and harmonious.

To develop the kinaesthetic sense

This preliminary work will also develop (an essential point) the kinaesthetic sense, in other words, the sense that a singer will have of what he is doing. The feedback of this information will enable him to regulate and modify his vocal and breathing activity at all times almost unconsciously ; thus he will be able to seek a new form of adaptation, a more effective equilibrium ; one more coherent as regards the requirements of the desired aesthetic goal.

The development of the kinaesthetic sense, the knowledge and comprehension, in practice, of its mechanisms, of all that the morphological and cerebral structure of man implies, including all that is the individual (habits, attitudes, all psycho-somatic reactions to environment and to other individuals) will lead the singer to greater autonomy in his evolution. The discovery of specific mechanisms linked to different aesthetics will provide him with greater expressivity and a clearer response to a clear intention. The readiness thus acquired leads to a greater adaptation at every moment for each vocal situation, which then leads the singer to a true authenticity of expression.

Exchange of information

Finally, from an educational point of view, the response of the student (i.e. his vocal behaviour, breathing and circulation) will always be the most adapted that he has found within himself when confronted with a stimulus or a suggested situation (according, as we have mentioned above, to the image the student has of himself). It is not a question of judging the response good or bad, but rather of listening, looking and sensing if this realisation is coherent according to the singer's intention (style, expression, colour and articulation), if the intention is clear, whatever it may be. If the coherence is lacking, I observe the relation between the different areas of the body and their functioning in order to try and determine where the trouble lies which leads him to failure. What we observe from the outside is often merely the end result of a series of disharmonious processes which must be unravelled in order to be discarded.

Teaching becomes a guide for experiment, for adventure into the body, the nervous system, the voice. Work becomes an exchange of information between the student (the information he gives by watching his own behaviour, his body) and the teacher who, according to all he has observed and heard, will in turn give information (the clearest information, at the "right" time) which will then motivate a new response, a new set of sensations...

Thus an image of the self is constructed, rich and full which will allow the singer to put to better use those wonderful instruments : the body and the voice.