

## **Thinking Sound: Reflections on the Application of Mental Training to Opera**

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Hans Gertz was a highly appreciated singing teacher based in Stockholm, Sweden. For more than 30 years, he taught the classical techniques of opera singing to students. The Stockholm Opera School, the Gothenburg Opera, the Gothenburg Opera School, the Copenhagen Opera School, and several other music schools benefited from Mr. Gertz's knowledge and experience. Of the hundreds of students he taught, forty have international careers on stage and in well-known opera houses.

### **Abstract**

Based on years of experience as a teacher of opera, Hans Gertz offers his reflections on the applicability of mental training to opera training. The importance of "correct" thinking is emphasized - if a singer is able to shape and colour sound in the mind, then its physical manifestation will be correct. A number of suggestions are presented for how students and teachers can use mental training in training the voice and pushing forth self imposed barriers.

### **Reflections on mental training and opera**

Most singers I know do not use mental training in a systematic way in their daily work. It might happen that they use it just before a big concert or opera performance, but rarely in a more structured way. I have read hundreds of books about singing techniques, on how to use your voice correctly, but I have not read a single book about combining singing technique with mental training. Yet, it is very important. One of the great singers of the past, Nellie Melba wrote the following in 1903 regarding singing: "Nearly all difficulties are of our own making and are the result of wrong or confused thinking." The great tenor Beniamino Gilgi said that one of his teachers Antonio Cotogni always told him: "Remember that you must always mentally shape the vowel and impart to it the right colour, timbre and

expression before actually producing it." He added, "Think more, do less."

I first encountered mental training being used in a highly defined way in 1989 when I heard and saw Lars-Eric Unestahl on television talking about his work and how important it is to "Think in the right way". I then realised that I had been using and teaching mental training for years. I called Lars-Eric after the program, and since then we have worked together and have held courses in mental training for singers. In my daily work with singers, I consistently use mental training.

A good general education is of great advantage to a singer. Every singer knows that she or he has to be in good health to sing well, and for that, specialised physical training exercises must be studied and practised regularly. It is my firm opinion that you also have to use

mental training in a structured manner on a daily basis.

First, mental training can be used for vocal technique improvement. Some of the most common faults which can benefit from mental training are as follows:

- Incorrect breathing techniques
- Incorrect placing of the voice
- Larynx is too high or too low
- Soft palate is too stiff or hangs down, forcing the sound to pass through the nose
- Subglottis pressure is too high or too low
- Glottic resistance is either too weak or too strong
- Interpretation of music, text, and acting is not what it could be.

Naturally you must do exercises to learn which muscles work incorrectly in order to have them work correctly. Often you cannot just think the larynx into a lower position if it is used to being in a high position. You have to do special physical training exercises, but improvement will be more rapid if you consciously understand what is happening. The same applies for breathing, use of the palate and tongue and so on. By combining the mind with the physical exercises, the singer will acquire the right positions for the rest of his or her life.

The novice in every field looks at the champion and says, "It looks so easy". It *is* easy or the player would not be a champion. What is "ease"? I think that it is doing something without unnecessary muscular action or tension. How many of us know when we are making unnecessary movements? The

good teacher knows how to correct a student when she or he is showing these kind of faults - reducing the amount of energy being wasted and showing the student a good way to focus energy to promote/produce the right kind of muscular use for the purpose of producing a very good note.

It must become easy to sing. You must become free from unnecessary muscular tension. We fear, for example, that we cannot reach a high note or sustain our breath for a long note. In such cases, fear takes our attention away from what we should be doing in order to sing well and causes muscles to tense up, muscles that should be free to work or to rest. We must strive to banish fear.

If a tenor has difficulties with a top note, for example, the high C in the aria, "Che gelida manina", from *La Boheme*, he might be afraid of that note, anticipating possible failure. The singer, knowing he has to reach the note, tries over and over again to produce this note, and cracks each time. The singer is then sure that no matter how hard he tries, he simply cannot sing this high note. What was at the start a difficulty, has now become a certainty of failure.

What the singer can do, instead of trying to sing the top note several times a day, crack, and feel distressed, is take the aria down one note. In doing so, he succeeds in singing the top note (which is lower), and creates a feeling of happiness, freedom, and success. Having done this for a couple of weeks, the singer will transpose the good feelings to the right key. Having implemented the feeling, and knowing in his mind that he is successful in taking the high note, he is highly likely to achieve the same re-

sult with a note higher than the one trained. There is no point in training one's faults.

The habit of orderly and structured work cannot be formed too early. Many students who are anxious and eager to achieve results do not know how to work. A singer has to work, study and develop all aspects of singing, otherwise there is no chance of further advancement. The young and inexperienced singer does not understand the importance and need for hard, consistent and quality work, thereby not giving enough time for the process to take place. Instead, they expect instant results. They start by doing too much on one day, and nothing on the next. They are "in the mood" one day, while another day, they may not be in the mood to work. Then, they wonder why they do not get the desired results. Steady, regular, quality work with the mind concentrated on what is being done is absolutely necessary to excel.

No work of any value can be done without concentration, and there can be no concentration without relaxation. The power of relaxation is one of the most important things in the study of singing, as it is in the preservation of health and in the art of living. In my daily work as a singing teacher, I tell singers, "First, you must relax. Relax the whole body. Then you must mentally (a) see the vowel, (b) feel the vowel, and (c) hear the vowel." Every vowel sound must be mentally shaped and mentally given the requisite colour before being physically produced. When thinking is correctly based, the physical part reacts and adjusts accordingly with equal accuracy. To sing the sound of the vowel "A"

as in father, if you can think the sound, it will be correct.

The singer must learn to build up his or her feelings of being a good singer. The old saying, "Form follows thought" is very true in this case. To train feelings of happiness when singing, the singer must love his or her own voice and must love to sing. In daily exercises, effort must be put into developing the feeling of being a good singer. The student must as soon as possible leave behind feelings of being a student and start to think, "I am a singer". He or she must carry out the mental and physical voice training as if she or he is singing a performance. Training becomes a performance or competition. Then, when you actually go to a concert or opera performance, you are used to it because you have done this performance hundreds of times in your mind.

Visualization is of great use to the singer. When you come to a new place where you are going to sing, it is not always the case that the conductor likes you and/or your voice. You must be able to perform well despite this. Having seen, felt, and heard yourself performing well will help tremendously. Your programming of success is then not as easily disturbed as it would be had you not been prepared or trained yourself for this mentally.

Also, if you have a cold, you can still train your voice as much as you usually do. This is simply because you can train silently with your mind, and have the feeling of placing the voice correctly.

The following are a list of suggestions for how to apply mental strategies to practice:

1. You can place the voice just by thinking. If you want to place the voice against the lips, nose, or up in the head or neck, you think the vowel where you want to have it. As the great tenor, Gilgi, said, "I mentally think every vowel in my mind before I sing."
2. You can train breathing by mental training. Think how you want to breathe and the body will do what you will it to do.
3. If the larynx is too high, you must train it to lower itself with special exercises for the muscles, but use them together with the mind as soon as possible.
4. You must always have the musical phrase in your mind. You must think the phrase and what you want your mind to do with it
5. It is necessary to be relaxed from the beginning, both in body and in mind.
6. You must see, feel and listen to the vowel.
7. If you have a cold, you can train your voice as much as you usually do. You can train silently with your mind and have the feeling of placing the voice correctly.
8. If you have difficulties singing a very high section, bring it down one note. After practice, you will eventually be able to sing it in the right key. Do not train your faults.
9. The student should think of him or herself as a real singer, and not a student. Do not practice, perform.
10. Think the sound and the colour of the vowel you want to sing, and then listen to the voice and correct it.
11. You must visualize, have imagination, and feel the right feeling.
12. Brigit Nilsson said, "Discipline, discipline and discipline."

A very important part of teaching singing is that the teacher shall not be a fault finder, but should try to listen to the good things in the student's voice and then work on developing them. To be happy in our work and art, we must believe in ourselves or we will accomplish very little.