

How to Sing Like the Great Singers

# How to Sing Like the Great Singers

By Robin Hendrix

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## Preface

I wrote this little book to share the results of my search for how the Great Singers produced the beautiful singing that made them famous. I had to discover the secrets of the great singers in order to save my own singing life. In the search, I found much more than technical answers. I came to know great men and women who were dedicated to sharing their knowledge and enthusiasm about beautiful expressive singing. Their writings fed my mind with much needed thought on why we sing and on our responsibilities as singers. There was a world that shamelessly discussed beauty and what it means to be an artist. These were the people that knew the secrets.

I found what I thought were the answers, and then confirmed them by research, most of it from books written at the turn of the twentieth century. A few hints also came from the amazing diva Karan Armstrong at the Lotte Lehmann Academy. Her exercise to release tension on high notes reinforced what I was learning. As I began to apply the basics of the technique, my singing became more beautiful, and as a result, more opportunities opened up for me. I make my living these days as a concert artist in Europe, singing programs that run the gamut from classical recital repertoire to legitimate Broadway. Thousands of people visit my clips on YouTube and there are many positive comments. Today I sing before the public with pleasure and ease, but it wasn't always this way.

Like many singers, I sang before I walked. My sisters and I sang around the house for amusement, mostly popular songs and school songs. I also took some piano lessons and sang in churches and did musical theatre. My formal vocal studies began very late – I was 27 before I knew I should study singing. In the end it finished satisfactorily in terms of teachers, but my voice was well placed in the mask more by accident than by training, and was subject to pushing on high notes. After graduation, life changes put my singing career on hold. While working full time, I started singing throughout Florida and after several years, made the jump to New York where I sang regularly in the area with some success. I worked during the day in an unrelated profession, and would rehearse in the evenings with my new husband, composer-pianist Michel Prezman, preparing concerts and recordings.

Michel accompanied singers in many of the top singing studios and master classes of New York. Sometimes he would arrange lessons for me. My singing was OK, but I longed to know more of the secrets of great singing, particularly high notes. I went for lessons in quite a few of those studios, but never found anyone with definitive, logical answers as to how to sing with ease, beauty and power. On more than one occasion, I found myself in trouble with their suggestions, and had to see a laryngologist. Tell me to do something that will bring me a benefit, and I will do it longer and harder than you could imagine. That kind of enthusiasm can be bad for the vocal cords if the suggestions are just plain wrong.

I chased down more rabbit holes in searching for answers than I care to admit. I was in serious trouble after one brilliant suggestion from a New York guru, and even though I had concert

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obligations looming, I had to take vocal rest and voice therapy. I was singing without knowing how I did it, and I knew it. I began relying more on my drama and less on my voice. As I continued searching for answers with gurus, I developed acid reflux from my singing technique. It turned into a raging case after a master class in France where we were instructed to do leg lifts to strengthen the diaphragm. I took oméprosol, a proton pump inhibitor, for years to relieve the symptoms. I also kept a bottle of prednisone in the closet, just in case I overdid it vocally.

As my singing life became more stressful, and gurus' answers were not working to liberate my voice, I was suffering. I knew I could sing like the greats, but it was getting harder to sing the way I wanted every time.

A family affair led me to live in France in April of 2007. I changed my entire life, but I brought my singing problems with me. I tried one last master class with a guru from Paris – total disaster – nearly every one of his students left with swollen chords and built-up abdominals from weight lifting. At home, I sometimes stood at the piano in great anguish. Songs with high pianissimos that used to be easy were becoming impossible. Practicing became a nightmare. I had to find the answers.

In October 2007, I required surgery to remove my gallbladder. It was microsurgery, but I was nevertheless ordered not to sing for awhile because of the pressure on the sutures. Lying on the couch got tiresome and I started longing to sing. I made up some little songs, and tried using very little breath to sing them without any pressure on my lungs. The tone surprised me with its ease of production, small but clear and easy, ringing in the head. I got a little excited. Had I discovered something useful? At the same time, Classical Singer Magazine arrived. It had an ad for a new book: *Head First – the Language of the Head Voice*, by Denes Striny. Intrigued by its title, I ordered the book and read it the minute it arrived.

In the first read, I completely missed the profundity of what Denes Striny was saying. It was so simplistic that I tossed the book to the floor. He was describing a way of singing based on relaxation and perfect vowels. Let the body sing based on imagining a beautiful sound. That was too easy. Right away, though, I picked it up and read it again with better understanding. It was a revelation to me. I read it again and again, mining more information each time. As soon as I could sing again, I began to apply what I could understand of his discoveries. Denes Striny talked about a texture that the Great Singers had in their voices, and that if we try to eliminate tension in the mouth and lips, and sing perfect vowels, we would see an enormous improvement in our singing. He referenced many Great Singers, and shared their descriptions of the sensation of great singing. They all knew something I didn't, and I wanted what they had - the knowledge of how to produce that beautiful, powerful sound for years and years with no destruction to the voice.

I did well with *Head First* until I hit a wall with the Debussy song cycle “Fêtes Galantes.” It took weeks to get the soft high notes I wanted for “Claire de Lune,” a song from the cycle. I had not yet begun to understand the degree of deep tissue relaxation required so that the right muscles have an open field in which to work with no resistance. “Fêtes Galantes” went well in performance, but I wanted to go further. What did the Great Singers know? I remembered some very old books I owned that discussed technique in detail, and I reread them with new appreciation – still nothing concrete that I could see. I looked on the internet library [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org) for other books I could study to glean more clues.

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I read many dozens of books on “voice culture” and am indebted to [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org) for providing access. I became obsessed with the epoch of the golden age of singing, the Great Singers themselves, their technique and the other things that led to their success. Most notable was the amount of work they did to master the technique and to keep it in top form during their long careers. But it was the famous pedagogues of the day who provided the best information. Some authors had studied the old Italian treatises for hints on how bel canto singers learned the art. Other authors had had outstanding singing careers and generously shared their experience in books. Still others opened new vistas to explore how interpretation affects the voice.

In reading these books it was interesting to note there was a battle between the “scientific method” and the “psychological method” at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Two distinctly different teaching styles arose as scientists armed with the newly invented laryngoscope became fascinated with how the singing apparatus works. Theories based on the observation of what happens when we sing were debated in print. The scientific method was for local control over the support muscles, the singing apparatus, and the larynx. Having observed those things in use during singing, they determined that it was those movements and positions that a singer should think about. Things like measuring air capacity and vibration, manipulation of the larynx and tongue, analyzing register breaks, and details of the vocal anatomy emerged as important to know.

The writings of the great pedagogues cited in the bibliography of this book contain rather sad descriptions of the results of such training, which they called the “local effort,” or “mechanical” school. They were deeply concerned about the state of voice teaching, finding more and more singers' voices destroyed or careers cut short.

The psychological method was for letting the mind control the results automatically - the less known about the singing apparatus, the better. They knew that there were too many tiny muscles to direct to ever master the voice by local control. They observed that vocal beauty comes from focusing on an ideal expression of the text through a completely available flexible mechanism. They also knew this way of singing could produce unique and inimitable voices.

Although the scientific method would lead to broken dreams as the result of misplaced effort, it won the day nearly everywhere, probably due to its novelty. Students who could not understand how local effort related to their own singing did not make progress and gave up. Many naturally gifted singers did succeed in spite of their training, until the lack of a proper technique cut short their careers. Denes Striny notes that this is still the case today. These singers often blamed themselves, or were said by their teachers to be lazy or just not meant to sing.

Certainly, there are some teachers who can tell you what you should sound like (velvet texture, play the voice like a violin), but very few of them can tell you exactly *how* to achieve it. That was Birgit Nilsson's experience with several of her teachers. There are teachers, however, who have learned the secrets of the Great Singers. They focus on ease of singing, beauty and art. They possess enough of the secrets to produce the Great Singers we have today.

After finding the books that supported the psychological method, I ordered copies to study in depth. They included two books about Enrico Caruso' technique, written by his doctor and his accompanist. Several books were written by successful teachers like D.A. Clippinger and Giovanni Battista Lamperti, each with long lists of Great Singers associated with their studios. Several Great Singers, such as William Shakespeare (the tenor), Sims Reeves, and David Ffrangcon-Davies wrote superb books. Two wonderful books featured interviews with the day's

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current Great Singers (*Vocal Mastery*, by Harriett Brower, 1910, and *Great Singers on Great Singing*, by Jerome Hines, 1985). These two books served as a window into the life of an opera star at the turn of the century and in modern times. Over and over again in discussions of technique, the theme of “no stiffness anywhere” and “pure ringing vowels” can be found. Ideas on inhalation were not always identical, but a significant number specifically mentioned the silent inhalation so important to their method. Descriptions of exhalation were more uniform: hold the air motionless and use as little as possible, keep the throat open, no stiffness anywhere in the head or neck, feel nothing in the throat, sing in the mask. Many of them said the same thing about wasting air: “Convert every molecule of air into tone”. In terms of practice, scales were a daily affair for most, and they all followed a regular routine of repertoire work.

I listened for hours to recordings and videos of the Great Singers. I am indebted to YouTube and their users, particularly Onegin65, who posted priceless material for those looking for evidence of the technique. When the videos were shot with live singing, not lip synched, it was very helpful to see the singer's lips, jaw, and face. We can imagine how it feels to sing with the texture and legato that marked their great singing. We can hear many of the qualities that made them Great Singers.

I studied their ideas on the singing technique and the art of singing. It took several years to synthesize all that I had read, beginning with Denes Striny's *Head First, The Language of the Head Voice* and finishing with Jerome Hines' *Great Singers on Great Singing*, a collection of interviews with Great Singers of the Metropolitan Opera asking about their technique. I had read the book many years ago but had missed a lot of things. New ideas flowed around me, and I tried on everything that made sense. I came to understand singing from an aural point of view. I learned that the body can be trusted to move heaven and earth to create what my imagination desires – IF I get out of its way. My own singing became easier and more confident. I was beginning to get it: Hear in your mind's ear the sound you want to make based on the images in the music, use the pure vowels to get your voice to the mask and keep it there, and then sing your song with no resistance.

All of this relaxation did more good for me than just improve my singing. With no unnecessary pressure in the breath displacing things, my health improved, as did my speaking voice. I was able to stop all acid reflux medication and it is a rare occasion that I require any medication for my voice.

This book compiles all the main ideas that were referenced in nearly every book I read from advocates of the psychological method, and it includes other interesting ideas that appeared in at least two or more books. In the latter case, the authors are identified. I tried to capture the ideas that rang true to me, that appeared over and over again, and that worked exactly as the author described. I discovered what I consider to be truths about the singing voice and how it really works, from a mental perspective. Some people close to me have read a draft of this book and mentioned that I repeat certain information often. There is a very good reason for that – each time we think of any action in singing, we must remember to apply the first concept of great singing: absolute release of all tension in the singing apparatus. What D.A. Clippinger says in his book *The Head Voice and Other Problems* is true: “It is necessary for most singers to work at relaxation long after they think they have it.”

I tried out my new technique in public, and the results were inspiring. I went deeper into the subject matter, and also began to teach at the time. I wanted to share what I'd re-discovered and what most of us did not receive in our formal and professional educations. My students all are

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making astounding progress as they “get it”. It's fun to see the first flowerings of their liberated voices. They feel the difference right away, and they begin to understand something of the phenomenon of beautiful, free singing. There are rapid results for those who work hard and can concentrate intensely. As the responses of the body become automatic, singing becomes a pure joy. I hope this little book will be of use to some singer, somewhere, who is as lost as I was.

Robin Hendrix

Serdinya, France  
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What is great singing? How will we know it when we hear it in our own voices?

Good singing is musical, with clear and ringing diction. Great singing is all this and more. The Great Singers were capable of securely expressing in strong, beautiful tones what the character being portrayed would say and feel. Mastery of their incredible technique freed them to interpret a piece as desired, within the limits of their vocal resources.

We know when singing is great because of the beautiful velvet quality of the sound, and because we are deeply affected by the words and music transmitted by the artist. We are unaware of the Great Singer's technique. We will hear it in our own voices when we stop looking for physical answers and start trying to use our will to remove the points of resistance in the singing apparatus. It is then that we begin to hear that velvety smooth texture and to feel the support - low, secure, and never pushed.

## What are the characteristics of a Great Singer?

There are certain characteristics shared by all the Great Singers. Harry Plunket Greene writes extensively on personal magnetism, and other writers repeatedly reference that characteristic as well as the other characteristics listed below.

### Most Important Characteristic

- Charisma -

The most important factor in predicting success in singing is the personal charisma or personal magnetism of the singer. Anyone's voice can become more beautiful from excellent singing lessons and serious study. That statement appears in nearly every old text. However, with a great technique and a strong charisma, the Great Singer can hold an audience enthralled for long periods of time. He or she shares generously of themselves and their art. The public has the sense that they have witnessed an event. Time seems to stand still. No matter how fine a singer's technique, the lack of capacity to enthrall an audience will put him at a competitive disadvantage.

### Other Important Characteristics

- a highly active and informed imagination -

Great Singers have highly active imaginations. This is necessary to be able to assume the identity or identities involved in a musical work. The imagination must be able to soar freely, shamelessly, with no limits. The more the singer experiences of life's facets, particularly through other arts and literature, the richer the material to serve his imagination. If it can be imagined, it can be sung,

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within the limitations of the voice. Languages and their diction are easier for a singer to master if he can imagine himself as a native speaker. It motivates him to understand the sound and the sense of the language he is to sing.

Thus a rich and free imagination is of great value. It runs the engine of the singing machine like a ship's captain, but with the advantage of automatically engaging just the right muscles for singing with great control, assuming the wrong muscles are not tensed. It is the imagination that stimulates the deep tissue relaxation necessary for beautiful, natural singing. At the same time it is directing automatic responses, imagination generates the vivid images and the emotional reactions that are then reflected in the song. It is an engine running consciously and unconsciously.

- musically intelligent –

Great Singers have fine musical instincts, giving them the ability to quickly feel and understand the nature of a musical work. Becoming a fine musician comes with work, but only if the basic musicality is there. Musicality cannot be created. Sometimes, though, as a particular singer drops technical difficulties, he or she experiences a blooming of their latent musicality.

- strong memory skills –

The Great Singer is able to memorize large numbers of music works and to retain them for years. This skill involves long hours of mental work, not singing work. It is possible to memorize the words and the music without singing a note. In the act of memorizing a piece, the Great Singer also forms the idealized performance in his imagination. It is important to be free of the music; singing is not reading a lesson from a book, it is telling a story. Eyes on paper ruin that feeling. If you must use music, try to do so with minimal glances.

- immense ambition –

Most of the Great Singers knew from their early days they were destined to sing for the public. To get there, they searched for the teachers and opportunities that would help lead them to their destinies. They worked hard and set very high goals for themselves. They envisioned themselves succeeding. Despite setbacks and hard work, the dream of a life in singing did not fade, but grew stronger as they reached greatness.

- the ability to work hard for an indeterminable period of time –

Most of the Great Singers worked for years perfecting their art before auditioning for important opportunities. The Great Singers were able to develop the technique to the degree that it could be depended upon, like a finely tuned car, for their interpretations. Hard work not only pays off, it can also be pleasurable, especially as a singer discovers the freedom of singing with the Great Singers' technique. Some lucky few learned the technique in their early years from family settings. These singers were the ones who arrived at success very early in life, and many of them enjoyed long careers.

## The Great Singers' Technique

The title of this section refers to the Great Singer's technique as being singular, because it was the technique used ubiquitously by great artists not long after the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This epoch

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included singers like Enrico Caruso, Louisa Tetrazzini, Amelita Gali-Curci, and later Rosa Ponselle, Lili Pons, Georges Thill, and still later Jussi Bjorling, Kathleen Ferrier, Franco Corelli, Birgit Nilsson, Anna Moffo, and other greats. They all continued to work hard on maintaining and improving their technique even after they reached the grand opera and concert stages of the world.

Many fine books were written at that time, some by Great Singers turned pedagogues. Although their ideas differed in minor ways, all had significant mentions of relaxation and pure vowels.

The goal of all the great singers was to mentally secure the voice in the mask and to keep it there throughout a song, never letting the sound production work descend to the mouth. There are definite sensations that accompany singing in the mask. The feeling is that your mouth is full of sound, but the main feeling is vibration behind the nose and into the head. The resulting color or texture is warm and velvety. The learning work requires building control in the mask in order to keep the voice there, no matter how high or low a note. Some people call that “voice placement.”

It is important to note that in order to sing like the greats, it is extremely helpful to listen to their recordings, in particular singers like Kathleen Ferrier and Jussi Bjorling. The rich legato texture and velvety quality of singing in the masque will be easier to create if we have the sound in our ears already.

## The Two Most Important Factors in the Technique

### Relaxation of All the Muscles in the Singing Apparatus

The necessity for relaxation appears in every book I read from the psychological school. Sometimes it is mentioned in passing while discussing a specific topic, and sometimes there are large sections discussing its benefits and the contrasting effect of singing with constriction. It cannot be emphasized enough, as it is at the core of the technique, along with the pure vowels. Marie Withrow says in *Some Staccato Notes for Singers*, “There cannot be great vocal liberation without perfect release of muscles: the question is, -- *Where?*”

The *singing apparatus* is the throat, the lips, the tongue, the cheeks, the jaw and the soft palate, and separately the larynx. The muscles in all the parts of the singing apparatus must be completely and thoroughly released, in a kind of deep tissue relaxation. We should feel as if there is no electrical energy passing anywhere through the muscles. This allows just the necessary muscles to be activated automatically by the mind. When just the right muscles are at work, it is a different feeling, much easier, with no resistance or discomfort. With concentrated will and some practice, wrongly engaged muscles can be released by simply willing the release of tension to happen. This relaxation is maintained throughout the sung phrase.

As the relaxation makes singing easier, singing becomes more beautiful and pleasing. As this pleasure increases, the relaxation and correct use of the singing muscles begin to become habits, and finally to act automatically. In a short time, the singer learns to feel the different places in the mouth and face to be able to release the tension, removing the restriction. The voice goes easily into the mask thanks to correct pronunciation through a relaxed singing apparatus. That is the real work of learning to sing with this technique - learning to detect and remove tension from individual places in the body as we sing in the mask. An astute teacher can hear the tension in the sound and can guide the student as to where to look. In time, the student's ears become as sharp as the teacher's, making the work even more effective since there are two sets of ears listening for the same result.

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With perfect relaxation, only the minimum number of muscles necessary to form the imagined perfect vowel is engaged. During singing, softness of the muscles of the face and mouth allows the larynx to move easily, changing the notes freely with no local control necessary. As Denes Striny says in *Head First*, “IT sings” in service to the image of the music. As the sound passes through the chambers of the relaxed but energized singing apparatus, the subtle differences in shape and size of the vibrating parts create the unique timbre and color in individual voices.

The abdomen must be tension-free as well, all the way down to the pelvis. It will move air for you as you sing, but at first it must be free to fill with air all the way to the bottom.

Many very old texts referred to the Italians as “the people who have no throats”, because they feel nothing in their throats when they speak or sing. Great Singers kept the idea of relaxation foremost in their minds, in order to feel the sensation of nothingness in the throat. The conscious desire to feel nothing in the throat can give unconscious instructions to a myriad of muscles to relax. This is an enormous aid during a performance, as it is impractical to be telling the tongue or the pharynx to relax during a long phrase or telling the jaw to drop with each vowel.

Sometimes at the beginning of building the perfect technique, there are particular parts of the singing apparatus that are especially tense. A teacher with astute hearing and discernment can tell where the constriction is and help the singer to reduce or eliminate it. Tension in the tongue or jaw is usually the culprit when the sound is throaty, and it is often related to incorrect diction, music not adequately prepared, or noisy, closed-throat breathing. The tongue must be tension-free to allow the slight movements necessary to form the pure vowels. The base of the tongue should be released, as tension there will affect the opening of the throat. The jaw should hang loose, cradling the tongue. The cheeks inside and out should have no muscle activity. The old Italian masters spoke of not touching the teeth with the insides of the cheeks. Removing all tension in the cheeks achieves this.

What about emotions and the face? When the technique is solid and the imagination is engaged in bringing the idealized performance to life, the face authentically reflects the emotions, if allowed by released muscles. But emotions must not be allowed to affect the muscles that produce beautiful tone, particularly the tongue and the throat.

### Perfect vowels ringing in the mask

With freedom of the muscles, the mind can create perfect vowels easily. With no restriction, the tone will ride the well-formed vowel to find its place in the mask, discussed in greater detail in a later section of this book. The mask is the most dominant place in the head for sensing resonance. Its primary sensors are in the area where the nose attaches to the skull. There is also significant sensation around the eyes and at times the top of the head. The mask is the place where a free tone is felt and can be controlled to some degree. The tone in the throat, but it is completely changed by passing through the mask.

The posture and the right tone sensation, discussed below, work in harmony to ensure that there is no outpouring of air as the tone is released. The less air that is used, the more intensely the vibrations from the vocal cords resound in the mask. It is this super resonance that we feel when the vowels are perfectly conceived and executed. We feel we can control them in the mask, in terms of intensity and warmth. The only way to have all the power available in the mask is to sing with the deepest tissue relaxation possible. This level of relaxation also allows places outside the mask to resonate, like the teeth, the throat, the lips, even the chest, thus amplifying the sound.

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When first learning the technique, most of the pedagogues agreed that less is more in terms of volume. Clippinger said it best: “In preparing the head voice, the student must begin with a tone that is entirely free from resistance and build from that. In a large majority of voices, it means practicing with a light soft tone.”

## Where to Start

### Releasing Muscles - Mind over Matter...

To begin the cultivation of a beautiful voice, the singer must understand that his imagination controls most of the results. This can be proven by asking him to imitate the voice of an animal, a child, a very elderly person, and finally an opera singer. Each time he tries a new sound, he will find that his imagination automatically creates the muscular conditions necessary to change the quality of the sound. If he concentrates, he will feel that mouth shapes, tongue muscles, even facial expressions change automatically in response to the imagined idea of the new sound. With total relaxation of the singing apparatus, just the right muscles will automatically engage. If the muscles necessary to produce perfect tones are occupied by unnecessary tension in any part of the singing mechanism, the tone suffers. Marie Withrow says in her book *Some Staccato Notes for Singers*, “The only, and yet one must say the *wonderful*, exercises that one may practice are those which make a Mental Demand for the Release of these muscles”.

What does total relaxation feel like to a singer? It has been referred to in many ways, including – “I sing with the mouth of an idiot” – Pavarotti, “When I sing I feel it the masque, not in my throat” – Birgit Nilsson. In *The Renaissance of the Vocal Art*, E.J. Myers, describes it not as relaxation, but as a “letting go” of muscular rigidity. Some people can achieve this by imitating the speech of someone who has had far too much to drink. The result has sometimes been described as singing that fills the mouth with rich, pleasant sensations, no strain anywhere. D.A. Clippinger, in his book *The Head Voice and Other Problems*, has an excellent synopsis of the situation: “Too much cannot be said on the subject of interference, or resistance. So long as there is any of it in evidence, it has its effect on tone quality.”

The release is a feeling that can be felt when deeply relaxing the groups of muscles around the mouth, throughout the tongue (particularly the base and sides), at the back of the throat, around the lips, the cheeks, around the eyes. The tongue sags. The jaw feels as if it is heavy with gravity. The lips are soft, slightly extended outward so as not to touch the teeth, and parted in a pleasant relaxed expression. The throat has a sensation of being open (the pre-yawn, they often called it), with air moving in and out freely. It may be helpful to imagine *relaxing open* a soft space at the back of the throat large enough for a small apple or an egg to fit. The open throat sensation is critical to remember, as it must be maintained during tone production.

## Posture

### Standing tall with expanded chest that never descends...

The right posture helps maintain the breathing by making it much easier to take a rapid yet deeply satisfying breath. When Great Singers took the stage, they maintained a statuesque posture. This enabled a liberated lower abdomen to instantly create the vacuum needed to fill the lungs. Harry Plunket Greene had this to say about posture: “Lift your chest as high as ever it will go, and keep it there throughout the whole process of singing, from a single note to a song.” This gives three things: a confident posture, a strong resonating chamber in the chest, and it lifts the chest off the



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muscles needed to control the breath. Lamperti spoke of standing “like a soldier.” The chest is expanded as fully as it will go and stays expanded, flexible but firm. There are many images for this – bony crate, high chest, and my preferred, constant expansion.

The abdomen is free. It will be needed to produce tone, but it is in repose during the time there is no singing. Shoulders are not engaged, but limp, and the trapezoid muscles are soft. The arms feel weightless (one can almost feel a sense of air under the armpits); there is no muscular activity in the arms or hands (no clenched fists, nervous use of the hands, self-conducting, etc.). The technique should be mastered without the aid of the arms. They can be used later for meaningful gestures and for aiding in singing but at the beginning they can be a source of tension and can distract the singer.

When the topic of posture was discussed, most of the singers and pedagogues said that one foot should be kept slightly ahead of the other, weight on the forward foot. When the weight is forward on one foot, there is a sense of anticipation in this position, like a diver just before he takes the plunge. There is buoyant energy throughout the body. It takes disciplined practice, but the posture quickly becomes automatic when the benefits of relaxation begin to enable great singing.

### **Relaxed lower abdomen, free to breathe as necessary...**

When all the muscles in the lower abdomen are quickly relaxed after a long exhalation of air, the release creates a vacuum that instantly fills the lungs - inhalation. With a little conscious effort, the singer can fill his back and side and front ribs at the same time. Anna Moffo spoke of this kind of release in Jerome Hines' book *Great Singers on Great Singing*.

At the release, air rushes down with the abdomen, and, at the thought of singing, the diaphragm is automatically stretched in the perfect position to hold the air – IF the chest has been kept in expansion. At this point, the singer's desire for a beautiful tone will instruct the abdomen to provide only the amount of air needed. The natural action of the abdominal muscles gives just enough air, with no pressure. The abdomen will rise and pull in naturally during the sung phrase with no need of help from any local effort – no pushing.

For some reason, the abdomen is one of the most difficult of places to feel tension, relaxation and movement. The muscles almost seem frozen. It may be because the chest is not held high enough and is pressing on the abdomen. It may be cultural as well; we live in times of stress and inattention, and some of us hold our abdominal muscles all day without realizing it. The muscles learn that position, and even the idea that there's more room for them to descend doesn't always liberate them. The expanded chest helps somewhat, but only constant attention to deeper and deeper relaxation of the muscles in the pelvic area of the body will give beginners good results. Having the intention, the mental demand, to take each breath deep into the body can help the abdomen to release completely and to descend to the pelvic floor.

The support comes automatically when the abdomen is free of unnecessary tension and available to propel a thin stream of air automatically. There are many ways to describe the sensation. In the preface to Denes Striny's book *Head First*, Birgit Nilsson spoke of the voice as having two pools: the high tone placement (in the mask), and the lower abdomen, which responds automatically. “Singing in this way is like a fountain with a plastic ball on the top which floats wonderfully on the water. The body should nowhere be hard or constricted, but elastic.” Frank Tubbs, in *Seed Thoughts for Singers*, spoke of willing the air in the mouth to be still, “like a pond of water with a

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small spring bubbling gently at the back. The spring's gentle bubbling does not disturb the water in the pond.”

To refill the air, the singer needs only to release the automatically tightened abdominal muscles at the end of each phrase. When the abdominal muscles tumble after the tension is released, they must fall fully, not getting stuck partially on shy muscles that won't release.

## Breathing – The Details

### Inhalation - Silent Breathing...

The desire to breathe in absolute silence automatically activates the necessary muscles to open the throat, raise the soft palate just enough, and quickly relax all the muscles in the full lower abdomen and back. There is no collapse of the chest and no moving of the shoulders, as they are not needed for this way of breathing. The belly drops to the pelvic floor as if in a fall, or as if pulled by gravity. This creates the vacuum that replenishes the air. Both Louis Orton and William Shakespeare (tenor) describe silent breathing in their books. Many great singers echoed what Marie Withrow articulated: “Let no one see you take a breath, let no one hear you take a breath. Let no one see you strain for lack of breath.”

In silent breathing, one takes breath in such a way as to make no sound whatsoever. The breath enters rapidly and silently when the throat is relaxed and the abdominal muscles fall in a full release of all muscular activity. The sudden intake of breath at a sudden and wonderful surprise can show the speed with which a breath can be taken. The singer must ensure there is no sound at the intake of the breath. If any sound can be heard, the throat is still closed. Singers who master silent breathing are astounded to hear other singers inhaling loudly. Silent breathing was advocated by most of the Great Singers. Lamperti spoke at length about it in the book *Vocal Wisdom*, by William Earl Brown: “Silent breathing should be the rule except for emotional effect. When silent breathing becomes second nature, the singer finds that he never breathes hurriedly not spasmodically, and always has plenty of air in the lungs.”

Breath should be taken very low in the body, filling all the way up. Breathing in this way releases the abdomen and pushes out the ribs, getting the diaphragm prepared to hold the air, and the abdomen prepared to press the air as needed.

For long or strenuous passages (very high notes, fortés, pianissimos, etc.), the singer can will that his ribs and back participate in the filling, but there is so little air needed for normal singing this is not always necessary. In the biography *Kathleen Ferrier: A Memoire*, Neville Cardiff relates that Kathleen Ferrier filled her back with so much air before long runs that choir members seated on stage behind the singer were astounded at how much her back expanded.

The act of breathing correctly opens the throat. The relaxation of muscular tension, particularly at the base of the tongue allows the throat to stay open. It is never to be *held* open by creating a gaping space at the back of the mouth, which would produce a suffocated sound due to the muscles being held. Rather it is to be *allowed* to remain open through total relaxation of every muscle that connects with it.

Setting the Breath – At the end of inhalation, there is a split second when the idea of singing automatically activates the support muscles that hold the breath back from the vocal mechanism;



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this happens naturally in speech and in singing. The only reason to mention this is to clarify that in singing and speaking, something happens differently than with just simple breathing in and out – it becomes breathing in, holding, then breathing out. It is the desire to sing a tone that automatically stops the normal breath flow. When the chest is held erect and the throat is open, the only way for the body to give out a tone is to hold the air still. It does this by automatically expanding the front, back and side muscles of the rib cage to suspend the diaphragm's movement. There is no local control necessary.

Controlled exhalation – what happens after the lungs are full and the breath is still. The mind controls the exhalation. It should be felt as if control comes from the pelvic region, low in the body. Lamperti called this the “pelvic hand”. Based on an ideal sound in the imagination, the mind generates unconscious messages to the relaxed and waiting abdomen as to how to provide the right amount of air. Then the muscles of the lower abdomen expel just the right amount of air, while the muscles of the front, back and side ribs hold the reserve air still by immobilizing the diaphragm. The singer works only in his mind based on sensations felt in the mask, and all the rest runs automatically. There is a sense of balance between the tone and the air. If all is working well, the singer will feel a connection between the sound in the mask and the lower abdomen. Lamperti says, “All muscles from the waist downward control start, stop, and intensity of vibration. The pelvis is the base of this control... From the pelvic hand rises energy which grasps the feet of this bubble-like tone, making it alive, real.”

To get an idea of the sensation of the dual effect of the diaphragm holding the air while the abdomen expels a small amount, you can breathe on your fingers as if to warm them. If you blow too hard, the warming is much less effective. If you exhale softly while holding back the air, the warmth arrives with little distortion. The effect can also be felt with the soft breath used to fog eyeglasses before cleaning them. With concentration, you can feel the two muscle areas acting independently. No more breath than that is needed for singing in the mask.

Nose or Mouth? Many opinions, one objective...

In reading the writings of the Great Singers and pedagogues of the last century, we find an enormous variety of opinions on minor things. One says always breathe in through the nose only, the other says never breathe in through the nose. Yet another says breathe in through them both simultaneously. Evidently, it does not make a great difference. Control does.

The Great Singers thought mainly of how to retain the amount of breath necessary to sing a phrase easily. The supply often included a small reserve, just in case a conductor slowed a tempo or the singer himself chose to hold a note longer than usual. That is why rehearsing a piece in full voice in preparation for a concert is important. It enables the body to know exactly how much air to take for a particular phrase.

## Starting the Tone

### Beginning at the top of the Breath cycle...

If breathing can be thought of as a cycle, there is a point at which breathing IN ends and breathing OUT begins. It is at this tangent that the tone should begin. There should be no time when the air is held still by closing the throat, even for the split second when the breath is set. Starting the tone on the change of breath helps the throat to stay open after the silent breath. The tone begins on the small amount of air that is first expelled when the thought of making the tone becomes action. No

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glottal attack or aspirated 'h' attacks are necessary. The key to easy breathing and long phrases comes from silent breathing.

### Keeping the Open Throat as the tone begins...

The open throat required for a silent breath provides the easiest path to great singing. It allows the complete sound made in the larynx to pass to the mask unimpeded. The throat must stay open after the inhalation is complete and the tone starts. In *Great Singers on Great Singing*, Rosa Ponselle says “Keep a square throat. Caruso taught me that. He kept a little stretch in the back of the throat to keep it open... open in the back and relaxed. It feels like a square but only on the high notes.” This imagery highlights how critically important the open throat is, and that it must be continuously remembered, even by the greatest singers.

### Get to the mask...

When the tone begins, all concentration must be focused on allowing the sound to enter the mask. This can only happen if the singing apparatus is relaxed and the throat open. Great singing takes place in the mask; the colors and emotions originate there. It is also the easiest place to sing, since it requires so little air or pressure. The mouth is the exit point for the final product, words sung with a great ringing tone and full of emotion.

All the great singers sang in the mask, and it is the core of their technique. There they could control the legato by their wills. They got to their masks and they stayed in them throughout every note they sang or spoke. Singing in the mask gave each of their voices a unique texture, timbre and ring. This kind of singing is also called “singing in the head voice”.

### The Slight Smile...

Many of the Great Singers interviewed mentioned the slight smile as an aid to accessing the mask. Nicolai Gedda, Rosa Ponselle, and several others described a hidden smile, an internal smile, the hint of a smile, a slight smile, but not a grin. The benefit is that the soft palate is lifted automatically and in just the right amount, more easily enabling an unobstructed passage of the tone mass. The internal smile also helps illuminate the eyes. It is also true that when a singer is excited and happy and very into his or her text, the internal smile is in place naturally.

### Supporting the Tone

All of the authors and singers agreed that the breath pressure needed for singing should be kept away from the vocal cords. A simple act of will to make a beautiful tone can hold the breath still while continuing to have an open throat. It automatically engages the right ribcage muscles to hold the breath without straining. The abdomen is not involved in holding the air still, only in moving a thin stream of air.

### Creating the slender stream of air...

Let the tone demand the air. If it is well placed, it will demand very little. Air is automatically fed to the singing apparatus by the lowest muscles of the abdomen in proportions determined by the singer's interpretation. There is no need to think about how much air to use, as that will only encourage pushing or freezing the breath. It would be better to think of relaxing the singing apparatus, trusting that the correct tone placement in the mask will control the air flow more efficiently.

The desire to communicate a specific idea is what controls the flow of air and directs the correct muscles to give the desired tone. Complex air flow instructions are sent unconsciously when ideas

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and emotions are expressed with correct pronunciation. This free abdominal support, low and continuous, produces the beautiful legato and the velvety texture for which the greats were known. Birgit Nilsson says that when the tone is properly placed in the mask, the singer will feel a connection with the lower abdomen. In his book *The Renaissance of the Vocal Art*, Edwin Myer says “Make no effort to hold or control the breath. The more you let go all contraction of body and throat muscles – the more freedom you give the voice, the more will the breath be controlled through automatic form and adjustment.”

## Pure Vowels

What are the pure vowels?

There are five Italian vowels that form the primary colors of the Great Singers' word palette. Their goal was to be able to feel the five vowels in the same place in the mask, where all rang true and easily with enormous resonance. Then they would sing all their words, regardless of the language in the same place where the pure vowels resonated best. A singer will feel the buzz in the mask when humming with a fully relaxed singing apparatus and an open throat. Pure vowels teach us where the mask is for each one of us.

The deep tissue relaxation of the singing apparatus is the key to properly placed vowels. Lamperti said, “The ringing in these chambers (sinuses in the head and cheek bones) depends on the instinctiveness, purity, and intensity of the initial tone in the throat, and not on your efforts to “place” the voice.”

To sing pure vowels, you must deeply relax the muscles all through the mouth, particularly the tongue, lips, cheeks, and jaw. Your only focus is on maintaining the quality of the sound of the pure vowel as it rings in the mask - beautiful, easy and in perfect pitch. It seems impossible to be able to speak or sing like that, but the tongue and the lips will move exactly as they should when you think of a scale or song fragment you want to sing. Let your concept of the song shape the results. You feel nothing in the throat. Each vowel seems to float on a thin stream of air. Muscles are moving to form the consonants and vowels, but you are not conscious of them. Old Italian arias are a good source for discovering the benefits of pure ringing vowels and a perfect legato. Handel arias are another good source, especially those with long passages sung on a single vowel.

The correct thought yields correct automatic action. The correct vowel sound in the mind's ear will move the tiny muscles that form the distinct vowel sound. Singers who master the pure vowels make rapid progress in their singing. David Ffrangcon Davies said in *The Singing of the Future*, “The quickest way to fine tone is fine pronunciation.”

The five pure vowels are:

'a' – the first vowel taught by the old Italian masters. It sounds like the 'a' in the English word “father”. It is formed with a pleasant face, a dropped jaw, open throat, and no energy whatsoever coursing through the tongue or lips or cheeks. Caruso sing the ‘a’ with a horizontal oval-shaped mouth. Correctly sung, the 'a' will ring in the mask and in front of the face. It was the preferred vowel for many of the old Italian teachers. They considered it to be the foundation for the other vowels. The 'a' is difficult to achieve without the deep tissue relaxation.

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'e' – It sounds like the 'e' in “echo” or “bet”. If it is well placed, it has a free and strong forward resonance. It should not be confused with the closed 'e', such as is heard in the French word “été” or the English word “vain”.

'i' – It sounds like the 'i' in the English word “free” or “see”. It rings in the mask very high, forward, and strongly if the tongue is free to form the most perfect 'i' imaginable. The 'i' was the preferred vowel of Kathleen Ferrier. When 'i' is sustained, it can be used as a tool to find the most resonating place in the mask. Watch out for tension at tip of the tongue when singing 'i'.

'o' – It sounds like the 'o' in the English word “home” or “hope”. It has a warm, easy, mellow quality. It rings outside the face but feels rich in the mouth. Singing 'o' helps in finding the placement more easily, as there is a definite sensation of well being when the 'o' is placed and ringing. It should not be sung carelessly, with an open sound like the 'o' in “hot”. It should be round and full, a long 'o'.

'u' – the lyric vowel. It sounds like the 'u' in the Italian word “tutti” or “luna”. It has a transparent quality that demands a relaxed face, particularly the lower lip, to give it body. When pure, it places the sound directly in the mask. It is beautiful in soft high notes, and is instrumental in covering the voice when necessary. Caruso often used the 'u' on the highest notes in a vocal scale, moving from 'a' to 'o', then peaking and descending with the 'u'. It cannot be sung with purity on high notes if there is any tension, thus its value in vocalises.

All other vowels are combinations of these five unique sounds.

### **Why the vowels are important..**

Singing consistently with the correctly placed vowels helps unify the voice and places the sound in the mask using the thin breath stream. Pure vowels take less air than distorted ones, and so make legato singing easier. Pure vowels create the beauty and character of a voice. The purer the vowel, the more beautiful is the singing.

Nearly all of the books spoke about the need to focus on speech to achieve great singing. The pure vowels were always their solution to keep the mind occupied with speech, not on thinking of tone production.

### **How to make the vowels..**

Think of the pure vowels in a phrase from an Italian song. Concentrate. Then, as you begin a phrase on a fresh low breath, remember to leave the throat open. The tongue must be in deep tissue relaxation to enable just the right muscles to form the perfect vowels automatically. As you sing, the lips participate only to the degree that they are needed by the vowel. They should not be pursed or tense, but can be slightly protruding, not touching the teeth. The inside of the cheeks should not touch the teeth. The body stays relaxed but in posture.

Concentrating on singing the phrase with perfect vowels controls what happens muscularly. The singer has just to think of the words and music with correct pronunciation and dramatic sense, and the singing apparatus will do the rest. This is always a pleasant surprise for beginners in the technique. They have only to focus on creating pure vowels that ring in the mask, and see to it that they stay there.

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When the technique is solid and the musical concept (notes and text and interpretation) is clear, the lips and tongue can participate to a much greater degree, molding the tone to the musical concept. Here is where artistry is set free.

### What they sound and feel like...

Pure vowels ring in the mask. There is no sound of air, only a full, rich, velvety tone. They feel free and easy. With the right breath production (using very little air), they make beautiful high notes seem easy because there's no pressure on the vocal chords. When each vowel is perfect, all the sensations center in the mask, and not in the throat. Great Singers feel nothing in their throats.

## The Attack

When exhalation begins, the first tone of a phrase should encounter no interference. What feels like a tiny first escape of the air instantly starts the tone spinning with no resistance. That is the attack. Smooth. We let the tone begin on the breath. This little bit of air is inaudible, not like the 'h' so often used to begin a vowel tone, or the glottal stop, which slaps the false chords when the tone is released. That tiny escape of air through an open throat is the healthiest way to start a tone. It is most easily achieved when there is no tension in the face or mouth, the chest is high, and the throat is open.

It is so important that the singer not scoop up to the starting note. To do so is an indication that the singer is not hearing the note in his head, but rather is depending on his throat to start some kind of tone and when it gets to the right pitch, he'll start singing the remainder as it should be sung. But it is too late because the vowels will be deformed as soon as the phrase starts, and they will have difficulty connecting to the mask.

## Voice Placement

### Feeling the Sensation of the Resonators in Action...

All around the place where the nose joins the skull are bony cavities that resonate when the air in those cavities is set into motion by the vibration of the initial sound. That is the "mask". We can feel this place intensely when we hum on the consonant 'n', producing the tone with the lips lightly closed, throat open and relaxed. From this hum, we have only to drop the jaw to begin singing with something close to the right placement. When we sing a perfect vowel through an unstricted throat, the resulting tone rings in just the right place in the mask. The most intense feelings are in the forward part of the face. Birgit Nilsson said "I try to place my voice as far in the front as possible without getting nasal... in the mask". The tone can also ring sympathetically in the upper skull (on high notes) or in the chest (on low notes).

Singing in the mask produces a texture of great beauty, allowing a beautiful perfect vowel to arrive, controlled only by the mind's imagination. We can intensify and alter the sound with just our minds if the vowel is correctly placed. This is the phenomenon the Italians discovered, and it works for everyone who tries it.

When sufficiently proficient with the pure vowels, the student can begin doing the *messa di voce*. The *messa di voce* is a means of building the control in the mask. It is done by singing a perfect vowel on one note, slowly increasing and then decreasing the dynamic of the tone. The change in

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sound volume is achieved by imagining the sound and then concentrating on the sensations in the mask to increase or decrease intensity, which might feel like opening and closing louvers in a shutter. All of the work for that exercise is mental, but we feel the results in the mask, thus its benefit. If the vowel is correctly placed, the tone can be swelled to *forté* using almost the same amount of breath pressure used for the *pianissimo*.

### The Eyes

The mask is very close to the eyes, and it is directly affected by eye movement and the affects of eye tension (dull or fixed staring eyes). The eyes must reflect the emotions of the music. They should not be fixed in a stare, even when singing scales. Bright shining eyes have a beneficial effect on the soft palate, the pharynx, and the other parts of the singing mechanism. They bring a naturalness to the artistic expression that the public sees immediately. Just an aside... many beginning singers do what is known as “lighousing”, scanning the audience from one side to another and back again during the entire performance. They may think they connect, but it is actually distracting to the audience. It would be better to choose a focus point in the hall and keep your eyes in this area. Bring the audience in to see what you are looking at with your focus point. Lighousing is a giveaway that the singer is anxious and not into his text.

### The Emotions... Joy is King

The emotion of joy aids greatly in feeling the forward placement in the mask. It seems that this emotion moves the tiny muscles in the singing apparatus into just the right position. It empowers deeper breathing, and gives uplift to the work. High notes become easier naturally. We can prove it by noting that when we speak, emotions of joy and exhilaration raise the voice pitch, while emotions of sorrow or worry lower the voice. Recent sociological research has discovered that one way to nourish joy in life is to form the practice of gratitude. This book does not explore that, but it is useful to know, and there is now a great deal of information in the social science literature on the subject. S.S. Curry, in *Mind and Voice*, says “Joy causes expansion of the whole body, stimulates the circulation and causes a greater retention of breath.” Marie Withrow, in her book *Some Staccato Notes for Singers* encouraged all singers to live in joy, as it is extremely beneficial for the voice.

All emotions affect the color of the tones if the singing apparatus is deeply relaxed. They subtly move the pharynx and other elements that color the sound, resulting in what we perceive as an emotional tone. The depth of our interpretations is revealed by the intensity of the transmission of emotions. A singer who sings without convincing emotional tones is not interesting at all.

Emotions expressed without an excellent technique can be counter-productive, particularly intense anger, intense sorrow, and uncontrolled rage, which can even hurt. Therefore it is wise to take the emotions to the edge in the studio, and sometimes over the edge, to know just how far to go in performance before the tone is affected. If a singer has made himself cry in the studio as a result of the genuine emotions he created for himself, he can pull back from that degree of intensity without reducing the affect. The audience has no such preparation, and often falls into tears as a result of deep expression, while the singer remains in control thanks to this preparation.

### Using even more relaxation to intensify the beauty of the tone...

As we come to understand unwanted tension and to banish it more and more, we find greater beauty in the quality of the voice and greater freedom of interpretation. Vowels are consistently placed where they should be. This beauty lures us on to explore further the benefits of removing the impediments to great singing.



## Equalizing the voice

An equalized voice has the same timbre and quality throughout its range. All vowels are produced in the same place in the mask no matter how high or low on the scale. It takes practice to trust the release of tension and the open throat enough in order not to push hard on high notes, but rather to make them dazzle in the mask.

All the singers and teachers commenting on the subject agreed that beginners' exercises should start in the middle range of the voice and then descend. No high notes should be attempted until the notes in the middle and lower range of the voice are produced correctly. The further we go in exploring relaxation, the more we understand, and we can add more notes safely to our range. We learn just how much weight to take out of the voice as we sing higher. Birgit Nilsson often said that she sang with a slim voice, but on hearing her singing, we might have the opposite impression. She played on the instrument in the mask, never forcing the tone regardless of how high or strong a note was to be sung. Singing with the mental concept of using a slender sound as we ascend a scale makes it easier to sing high notes.

We can sing with ease up and down the scale if we keep our posture up, relax the singing apparatus, and wish to feel nothing in the throat as the notes change in our scale. All vowels should resonate in the same place regardless of the notes they are sung upon - nothing in the mouth or throat should change when a note changes. The mind changes the pitches naturally and unconsciously, moving the larynx with total liberation, as we maintain the position in the mask for the vowel. The pitch is always more accurate that way, and easier!

## Perfect Legato

The vowel tone is like a sunbeam passing through a stained glass window. The sunbeam is cut by the glass and shaped by the lead around it, but immediately the sunbeam shines through as strong as ever and in the same direction, no matter what the color or shape is. The sunbeam in singing is the tone, solid and continuous. It may be molded by the mouth and lips into different vowels and cut through by consonants, but it is constantly vibrating in the mask and flowing from the lips in a steady stream of sound.

### The Little Portamento

For the tone to be continuous and beautiful, the throat must stay open. It is easier for beginners to learn this feeling when using a short portamento between two or more notes on one syllable. The vowel stays open and in place, and the tone changes quickly but smoothly, no stopping of the sound. If correctly done, the short portamento is inaudible to listeners, but it gives a creamy smooth quality to the singing. It makes singing easier and more beautiful.

The consonants are useful to a perfect legato, but can also close the throat when done incorrectly. Here are some guidelines:

- A consonant must sound clear and strong, then quickly cede the scene to the vowel that follows. Check for residual tension after the consonant ends and the vowel takes over.
- A vowel preceding a consonant must not be deformed by anticipating the consonant; this often happens when a vowel is followed by an 'n', 'r', or 'l'. Hold the vowel out to the last moment and then make the ending consonant.

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- A consonant should not be under or over pronounced; the first makes clear diction suffer, and the second deforms the tone through unnecessary tension.
- If the consonant involves jaw movement, the singer must be sure to let the jaw fall back down. He must avoid “chewing on his words” because of excessive jaw action.
- There should be no change of pressure or volume for a vowel following a consonant. So many singers fall into the trap of putting a “swell” on nearly every note, thinking it sounds artistic – *viiii-siiii d’aaaar-te*. The vowel should begin on the full pressure needed for the musical idea, and not be eased into systematically as if using the pedal of an organ. Great Singers did not and do not do this. It cuts the musical line and kills good diction.

Another aid to a perfect legato is the elimination of the aspirated 'h' between notes in a florid passage or even a two-note figure on a single vowel. This idea comes from one of the wonderful master class videos of Elisabeth Schwarzkopf. The mind is capable of cleanly changing the pitch without having to use an 'h' to restate the vowel each time it sounds on more than one note. This 'h' is heard often when amateurs sing florid passages from Handel's works and attempt to delineate every note. It is a cause of lost air. A singer must have the musical idea in his mind, and then he must allow the singing mechanism to match the mental conception with no interference. If the throat is open and the musical conception is clear, the larynx will move all by itself, producing beautiful, accurate notes. A correctly formed tone ignites the next to take its proper pitch, with no assistance needed by adding an “h”.

## Vital Force

The turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a time of enormous scientific and psychological discoveries. Metaphysics was popular, and there were many communities of thought started around single concepts. The idea of vital force, or continuous vitality, became popular as a concept to be applied to singing. Several books directly addressed the need for vital force. They spoke of an invigorating energy emanating upward and outward from the large muscles in the external parts of the body – leg and arm muscles – as well as from the core of the body. They spoke of using the entire body to sing, harnessing that vital energy in the large external muscles to support the work of the internal muscles, by which they meant the muscles of the singing apparatus or just the larynx itself. There is reason in this. We cannot sing with a passive body. If a singer can harness the energy in the parts of the body not directly related to sound production, he will reduce strain on the small muscles and tissues that *are* related. An act of will to feel or expand the sensation of vigorous energy is all it takes.

A highly useful concept is to use the vital energy to lift the body upward from the pelvic region. It helps to reinforce the posture, keeping the chest far from the breathing mechanism. The idea of creating the longest line possible from the pelvic region to the sternum can also be useful. If the chest is held high, and if we can relax enough to let the vowel tone ring in the mask, we will feel the communication between the pelvic region and the tone in the mask. We will feel the vital energy when all the mental effort is based on correct pronunciation and prolonged vibration in the mask. A lower abdomen, relaxed by low breathing, is crucial for everything to work correctly together.

One of the groups of large muscles that can be employed to great advantage when learning the technique is the back. The concept of singing with the back – the sensation of leaning against an



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invisible wall and using it for support as you sing – is effective in reducing the tension on the singing apparatus and the lower abdomen. Singing with the back constructs a solid foundation for holding the chest high and outward, freeing the breathing mechanism for a beautiful legato and a creamy or velvety texture. Singing with the back activates all the muscles of the ribcage. No direct muscle control will achieve this; only the intention of singing using the back will do it. The effect is amazing, particularly for beginning singers. This concept can be left off when it no longer makes a contribution.

All of these concepts help the singer to garner the enormous amount of energy needed to sing demanding repertoire.

It is the experience of this book's author that when we sing with our whole hearts, when we completely immerse ourselves in the work with confidence in our technique, that energy becomes available in abundance without conscious effort. Lamperti seems to agree: “It is the desire to experience these intense sensations of vibration and resonance of word and tone that causes the body to gather the unseen and unfelt energy that produces them.” It is in the studio, with all its mixed emotions and self-criticism, that we may need to remember to create and use that energy. Great performers were able to create vital energy consistently, resulting in a consistently liberated expression of their art.

## Interpretation

Interpretation is the most critical ingredient for fine singing. It is the life force breathed into the skeleton and musculature of a musical work. It unites the work from beginning to end. It gives variety to a beautiful voice, making it possible to hold the public's interest. It fuels the body with instructions from the imagination to stand in a certain way, to have a certain facial expression, or to color or expand a sound in a specific way. It rings true in the heart of the listener. Without it, singing is a gymnastic exercise.

In order to interpret well, we must have full confidence in our technique, and full confidence in our concept of the song. Many books spoke of a need for a solid technique before any interpretation is attempted. Others demanded that emotional intention be there from the very beginning, saying that definite emotional expression should be evident even in scales. Neville Cardiff said that those who heard Kathleen Ferrier vocalizing were charmed by her expression. Each singer should be able to choose the moment when the exploration of a tone can be expanded to include expression. Singers who are not certain of the tone placement may be hesitant to add emotional expression. Some experimentation could be useful.

As was mentioned above, the Great Singers were serious students of theatre. Some, like Georges Thill, toured the world singing only the operatic repertoire at which they excelled, while others stayed at the same grand opera hall for many years, creating 40 or 50 leading roles, like Caruso, who had memorized more than 70. While most of the Great Singers are remembered for their opera work, there were great concert artists who created brilliant interpretations in works for voice and orchestra or voice and piano. Several Great Singers, like Kathleen Ferrier and Maureen Forester, specialized in recital and orchestral singing and recording. Dietrich Fischer-Diskau made his fame singing and recording German lieder before his operatic career took off.

There are many fine books on the subject of interpretation, most notably Plunket Greene's *Interpretation in Song* and S.S. Curry's *Foundations of Expression*. Curry says “Expression is

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infinitely complex, and to start with the idea that delivery belongs to the body and can be regulated by rules or conscious directions is sure to produce superficial results”, meaning that the idea of the story to be told must start in the mind, and then, under the right conditions, the body will automatically respond to and reflect the idea as conceived by the singer. In *Kathleen Ferrier – A Memoire*, Roy Henderson says that interpretation did not come naturally to Kathleen Ferrier. She had to work very hard on visualizing the location of characters, trees, and other objects that decorated the scene of a song. Perhaps the most intense description of interpretation comes from Marie Withrow in *Some Staccato Notes for Singers*: “Your only real and closely related audience is Yourself! Use the Voice, the Energy, the Psychic Force... to fill yourself. Play well on your own heart-strings, and according to nature's laws, if you strike them vigorously enough, all the other heart-strings will sympathetically respond.”

With a solid technique, we are free to feel the characters or situations, to portray them as the composer envisioned, using all our imagination and life experience to flesh out the personalities or the situation. For that moment, we are not just singers, we have the privilege of bringing to life a composer, perhaps a poet, and a situation real or imagined. It is a rich experience for us, and for the audience.

## Epilogue

I am convinced of the benefits of this kind of singing for all types of repertoire, even popular music. If all our musical artists sang with the ease and expression possible with the head voice, our music would be enriched, and possibly the artists' lives made better, as they are set free. Their style and manner of delivery would not change but the beauty of their voices would add impact to their songs.

Studying this way of singing is a lifetime affair, as we come to know ourselves, our way of working, and our way of thinking about singing and its relationship to our lives. The level of work required to reach the pinnacle is very high, but it is sure to yield results. We are only limited by our capacity to work with intelligence and deep concentration.

I hope you'll try this way of singing. If you do your best to sing using the concepts of elimination of resistance, singing in the mask, and letting the informed imagination control things, you'll get immediate results, no matter what repertoire you sing. Add the pure vowels, and you'll be astounded. It may take time to feel the total relaxation affect, but even a little release of tension yields noticeable results. Once you do try it and you notice the results, you'll be convinced that there's something to this ancient way of singing that bears another look, a long one.

## Bibliography

These are the authors who helped me find my way. Their style of writing was at times formal and forceful, other times personal and engaging. They have done a great kindness by sharing their knowledge and passion for great singing. Note the years in which most of these books were published. It is astonishing how fresh their ideas and their language are. I hope that through my book and the books that led it its existence, more singers and teachers of singing will come to know the pleasure of singing with this nearly forgotten human phenomenon, the technique of the Great Singers.

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*Head First - The Language of the Head Voice; a Concise Study of Learning to Sing in the Head Voice*, Denes Striny; 2007, Hamilton Books, The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, New York, forward by Birgit Nilsson

This was the first book that put enough ideas together for me to start the hunt for answers – an amazing journey. I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to Denes Striny for what he discovered. *Head First* sets forth the problem: that most singers are burned out or give up before they reach their career potential. We singers are born, not made, and if we cannot find the right instruction to free the voice, our mental and physical health suffers. We feel depressed when nothing seems to give us the free, easy, and beautiful voice we know we should have. We cannot see how the Great Singers produced the sound we want. Denes Striny says that is because most people were not and still are not being trained from the start in the Great Singer's technique, including himself and me. He tells us how to replace pressured, strangled singing with free and easy singing. He describes the beauty of great singing, and quotes many Great Singers' reflections on singing. He says there is a texture we can hear and feel if we let "IT" sing. He is very unhappy at the state of affairs in the voice teaching community today, since fewer and fewer professional singers enjoy long careers. This book should be read at least twice, with an open mind. Watch out, it can change your life.

**The Head Voice and Other Problems, D.A. Clippinger; 1907, Oliver Ditson Company, Boston.**

This was the second most influential book I read. Clippinger was a great singing teacher and choral director in Chicago, the second greatest city for music in the United States at the time. He says that "the singer's worst enemy is resistance. This is what is meant by the terms *interference*, *rigidity*, *tension*. These all mean muscular contraction where it should not be." He says that we can give mental commands to release that tension. He notes that the contraction that prevents the vocal instrument to act automatically is based on the fear of hearing our voices outside our normal speaking ranges. He describes the level of relaxation required to produce a beautiful vowel, and where to search for the tension that mars the sound. He said: "A tone exists first as a mental concept, and the quality of the mental concept determines the quality of the tone." Pure psychological school. His other book, *The Clippinger Class-Method of Voice Culture*, is a recapitulation of this book, with more exercises. His discussions on beauty and art are so profound, they should be read by everyone, regardless of whether they are singers.

**Seed Thoughts for Singers, Frank Herbert Tubbs; 1897 (self-published) New York**

Excellent source of inspiration for a singer's life: Organization, ambition and success, striving to let the body respond naturally to the mind's directions, resolving that speech is the basis of great singing, understanding concentration, and so much more.

**Vocal Wisdom : Maxims of Giovanni Battista Lamperti, William Earl Brown; 1931 Crescendo Publishing Co., Boston**

William Brown was pupil and assistant to Lamperti, the last great master of the old Italian manner of singing. The book is a collection of maxims in Lamperti's own words, which he dictated to Mr. Brown over a period of five years. They cover the full spectrum of singing, and the singer's sensations of correct singing. Lamperti does not like the term "relaxation" but rather that the outer muscles of the body assume a greater role to support resonance of tone, freeing the inner muscles (the singing apparatus) to act instinctively to render the text, their sole function. His idea of expansion was that there should be a constant feeling of being stretched in all directions. He also said "When your tone issues from the focus of vibration, you are singing." I believe he is referring

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to singing in the mask. When I first read this book many years ago, I was not ready to understand the concepts. Now I understand his description of the balance between breath and tone. That is a sensation I have now experienced. This book has enormous depths to plumb, and I have not yet finished. Before reading this book, it would be helpful for a beginner to have a clear understanding of the mask and other concepts.

### **The Technique of Bel Canto, Giovanni Battista Lamperti; 1905, G. Schirmer, New York.**

This book is, in Lamperti's own words, a concise version of the technique, with many exercises for accuracy and agility in coloratura singing. Each word in this short book is weighted heavily in the basics of the technique. The description on posture is one paragraph, but each phrase in it contains large concepts important to understand. For example, "Take care above all that the muscles of the neck and throat are not unnecessarily tense. The entire attitude must be easy and unconstrained." In this sentence, there lies an ocean of detail to discover, but it is not easily done through this little book alone.

### **Some Staccato Notes for Singers, Marie Withrow; 1915, Oliver Ditson, Boston.**

This book is of enormous value for the singing artist trying to stay true to the ideals of singing. Marie Withrow defines the difference between amateurs and artists. She speaks of the art of singing from a technical and spiritual point of view, stating that there must be "elevation of the body, elation of the mind, and exultation of spirit." She said that the higher the nobility of thought, the greater will be our singing. She discusses the human phenomena of sympathy in singing, saying that if a singer plucks his own heart strings, he cannot help but engender sympathetic vibrations in the hearts of all who hear him. She also emphasizes the use of daring in learning to sing – dare to dance around the studio, dare to laugh, dare to clap the rhythm and step the scales, dare to crash down ones' hands on the piano, dare to sing with immense sensitivity, dare to expose oneself – dare to be vulnerable. She encourages imitation of the Great Singers, saying "the greatest masters make the greatest examples". Reading her book is a profoundly enriching experience.

### **The Singing of Tomorrow, David Ffrangcon-Davies; 1905, John Lane, New York.**

This book has a preface by the great composer Edward Elgar, who held the author in high regard. Ffrangcon-Davies was a successful singer whose health was fragile. After an active singing career, he retired from the stage and began writing and teaching at the Royal Academy of Music. He was a student of William Shakespeare (the tenor). The premise of this book is to lay out a new way of teaching singers, such that they recognize that the voice is the servant of the mind. He says voice is a medium of touch, since sensations are all that we have to go on. He addresses every facet of singing, including the technique, diction, role construction, style, and so much more. He strives to convince the singer to build a strong foundation in personal values. Art is above all truth. He said we should be authentic in all we do. He added an admonition regarding role creation and emotionalism: "Character engaged upon characterization is ever more fruitful than emotionalism engaged upon emotion."

### **The Art of Singing, William Shakespeare (tenor); 1905, Oliver Ditson Company, New York.**

The great tenor William Shakespeare was famous in the Victorian epoch. He studied with Lamperti in the 1870s, and his writing speaks of the same balance between breath and tone that Lamperti taught, but goes further in the discussion of removing tension. In this book, he thoroughly explains silent breathing, relaxation, and the quick drop of the abdomen to refill the

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air. He subscribes to the natural benefits of correct pronunciation, and gives plenty of exercises and describes their application.

### **Plain Words on Singing, William Shakespeare (tenor); 1924, Putnam, London.**

Here the author lays out his treatise on “silent breathing” and its value. He talks about mastering the breathing technique and then working on interpretation once technique becomes automatic. He says that the mind directs the pitch, intensity and color of the words, and the body follows automatically based on the mental image. “The old Italians masters insisted that the throat be free and open, so that the tongue can readily and unconsciously adapt itself to the tone or pronunciation of the vowels.” He has a large section of quotes and analysis from Italian texts from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### **On the Art of Singing, Sims Reeves; 1900, Boosey & Co., New York.**

This book is the shortest of them all, but it is packed with information. Sims Reeves was the foremost English tenor of his epoch, the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, high Victorian. This great artist was also a fine technician, singing grand opera and giving concerts into his seventies. He believes there are two registers, the chest and the head, named for where the vibrations are felt. He talks primarily about the head voice (not falsetto). He believes there is one true way of singing, that of the head voice (singing in the mask), controlled by speech.

### **The Renaissance of the Voice, Edmund John Myer; 1902, the Boston Music Company, Boston.**

Myer's focus is on elasticity and vital energy. Let “thought and will control all physical action in singing”. His description of the conditions necessary to sing the ideal tone frequently mentions relaxation. He dislikes the flaccid school, with no muscle energy, but he despises the rigid mechanical (scientific) school. He prefers the physical freedom that comes from vitalized energy, emotional expression, and physical movement. He developed movements to free the voice but they are not fully described in this book. His idea that the entire body should continuously feel expansion mirrors Lamperti's ideas, and merits further exploration.

### **Resonance in Singing and Speaking, Dr. Thomas Fillebrown; 1911 (posthumous), Oliver Ditson, Boston.**

Surgeon and student of singing, Dr. Fillebrown discusses the resonating chambers of the voice, and the small amount of air needed for the tone to vibrate in those chambers. He formed his theories about the resonating chambers while working with his patients after cleft palate surgery.

### **Psychology of Singing, David C. Taylor; 1908, Macmillan Company, New York**

Excellent text on the problems of the scientific method, which he calls “mechanical instruction”, and a discussion of the old Italian method and why it is the only way to sing “on the breath”. Here is a good synopsis of his position on the scientific school: “Voice culture has not progressed. Exactly the contrary has taken place. Before the introduction of mechanical methods, every earnest vocal student was sure of learning to use his voice properly, and of developing the full measure of his natural endowments. Mechanical instruction has upset all this. Nowadays the successful voice student is the exception.” Not much has changed.

### **Voice Culture Made Easy, Louis Orton; 1938, Thorsons, London**

Here is a wonderful book by a famous hypnotherapist and singing teacher containing information on how to focus the attention as one starts to learn the technique. In the chapter “How to Think Aright”, Orton lays out a way to think and concentrate that is excellent. He satisfies the scientific



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crowd with long sections on what happens physically during singing, but it is his descriptions of the sensations of perfect vowel production which are the most interesting. His approach is completely psychological, and relaxation is the primary tool. He says of vowels that we should “touch and stay”, meaning let the vowel arrive in the mask exactly where it rings most freely, and keep it there, full and rich for the length of the note. He quotes Sir Charles Santly: The first note should be “of equal power throughout, without the slightest shock at the beginning or end; in fact, forming a perfect solid rectangle of sound”.

### **Vocal Mastery, Harriett Brower; 1919, Oliver Ditson Company, New York.**

This book offers a fine selection of interviews with the Great Singers at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It discusses the daily customs and personal characteristics of young and old great opera singers. They include Enrico Caruso, Lilli Lehmann, Geraldine Ferrar, Amelita Galli-Curci, and many others, as well as some top pedagogues of the day. They spoke of the absence of any strain or pressure when singing. All were bel canto trained. Almost all spoke of daily scales to help place and strengthen the voice naturally. They did not mention lifting weights or any specific physical training outside of singing itself. Caruso summed up what most of the Great Singers said about achieving great singing: “Work – work – work, and sacrifice”.

### **Caruso's Method of Voice Production, Dr. P. Mario Marafioti; 1948 (posthumous), Clara Marafioti**

This book was written in 1921 by Mario Marafioti, personal doctor of Enrico Caruso during his long tenure at the Metropolitan Opera. Caruso read the book and wrote a letter expressing his support of the contents, which is included in the preface. Dr. Marafioti was a laryngologist with years of experience treating great singers. He formulated his description of the perfect technique based on his observations of their singing and discussions with them. He starts with these fundamentals: voice is speech, use a minimum air, find freedom from interference, singing develops breathing, resonance furnishes volume and quality, speaking voice determines the pitch and range of the singing voice, and that there are no registers in a well trained voice.

### **Caruso and the art of Singing, Salvador Fucito & Bernard J. Beyer, F.A. Stokes, 1922, New York**

The accompanist and friend of Enrico Caruso wrote this loving remembrance of the man and his voice. The book includes a long section on the great singer’s breathing power. Again as others have, he spoke of Caruso’s ability to convert every particle of air into sound, with air in reserve. There are descriptions of the many things Caruso did when singing, but he does not tell us exactly how he did them. The main idea from this book was that the greatest singer of all controlled his instrument completely by will, not by mechanical means. The second idea is that Caruso believed there is no set method for learning to sing, rather there is a set of ideals to achieve in singing, and there are definite suggestions one can try for achieving them.

### **Interpretation in Song, Harry Plunket Greene; 1912, Macmillan Company, New York.**

Harry Plunket Greene was one of the Great Singers from Ireland. His fame arose from his incredibly astute interpretations of song literature on the concert stage. His book focuses on the qualities necessary to succeed in concert singing: a perfect technique, magnetism (charisma), sense of atmosphere, command of tone color. He assumes the reader has a solid technique and so does not go into it much. But just in case, at the end, he discusses breathing in a brilliant and succinct chapter he calls “How to Breathe”. It is he who said: “Lift your chest as high as ever it will go, and keep it there throughout the whole process of singing, from a single note to a song.” The benefits are that it gets the chest out of the way - thus freeing the lungs' movements, it adds

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resonance like a drum, and it gives a presence the audience can feel. His discussions on interpretation and program creation are very useful, and stimulate the imagination. His opinions are strongly on the side of the psychological school, believing that the less the singer knows about the physiology of the voice, the better. His wit is sharp, and we get a real glimpse into the world of concert singing in England at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Simple Truths Used by Great Singers, Sarah Robinson Duff; 1919, Oliver Ditson Company, Boston.**

This was a late arrival, and I was delighted to find an intelligent, opinionated view of mental control and discipline in studying singing. Ms. Duff was the teacher of Mary Garden (who started studying with her at the age of six) and several other highly successful singers. She discusses the technique using the same exhortation to release all the muscles in the singing apparatus, and exhale from below the diaphragm with some back expansion. She quotes several of the Great Singers during her explanations, and like so many others, she believes there are no audible registers in a well produced voice.

### **Voice and Mind, Principles and Methods in Vocal Training, S. S. Curry; 1910, S. S. Curry.**

Excellent book on the effects of emotion on singing. Curry believes that the singing voice is a reflection of the outpouring of our thoughts and their resulting emotions. He cites freedom from restriction as the key to expressive singing, and has the same approach to technique as the others of the psychological school. He provides many poems to stimulate the imagination and gives insight into how the emotions affect the sound.

### **How to Breathe, Speak and Sing, Robert Stephenson; 1914, Frederick A. Stokes Company, New York.**

This book lays out the old Italian technique as nearly as the author can make out, based on extensive research. It is interesting how he dogmatically states what he believes about breathing only through the nose, although Lamperti condemned it, a minor point. Again, a wide open and unconscious throat is mentioned as being critical. He says that no confusion should be made between a wide open throat and a wide open mouth, which is disastrous except for trained singers.

### **Kathleen Ferrier – a Memoire, Neville Cardiff, 1969, Hamilton, London.**

Kathleen Ferrier was the embodiment for me of the head voice, singing always in the mask. Her contralto voice was beautiful, unique, and superbly controlled, thanks to her studies with Roy Henderson, a great singer and a master teacher. He showed her how to liberate and perfect her voice, and he contributed a priceless chapter to this memoire. He gives us some useful hints in his descriptions of working with Kathleen to find her voice placement. It is he who talks about her love of vocalizing on the vowel 'i'. The book contains great stories with loving tributes to her, and plenty of insights into concert life. Gerald Moore, the great accompanist, tells the most touching stories, having been closest to Kathleen's art and her humanity during their performances.

### **Great Singers on Great Singing, Jerome Hines; 1982, Doubleday & Company, New York.**

The magnificent bass Jerome Hines sang at the Metropolitan Opera for many years, and was a standard name seen on many concert programs. For this excellent book, he interviewed forty of the worlds' greatest singers, all of whom had long careers. In the interviews, he questioned each singer about the technique, and their responses were remarkably similar though expressed in many different ways. He asked about the open throat, support, expression. All agreed that the open

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throat is the key to everything. Rosa Ponselle even imagined a rectangle standing permanently at the back of the throat, holding it open. Birgit Nilsson describes how after hitting a wall due to an incomplete technique, she decided she would never have another teacher and would sort it out herself, which she did. By necessity and sheer force of will, she discovered the secrets of the open throat, the relaxation, and the perfect placement of the tone in the mask.

### About the Author

Robin Hendrix is a concert artist, voice teacher, and lecturer who lives in the village of Serdinya, in the south of France near the border of Spain. She holds a degree in Voice Performance from the Florida State University School of Music. Robin has given concerts in New York, Philadelphia, Paris, Utrecht, and throughout the south of France. Her CD “The Lover’s Curse” won critical acclaim and her children’s CD “Nursery Rhymes and Nursery Songs by JW Elliott” won a Parents Choice award. Her voice is warm, powerful and full of emotion. People often comment that they remember moments from her concerts for years afterwards. Clips from her many concerts can be seen on YouTube.

Robin and her husband, composer/pianist Michel Prezman, have converted an old relais de poste in Serdinya into the “Center for the Formation of the Voice”. They teach privately and hold lectures and master classes at the facility, and students are invited to board there. For more information, you can visit the website: [www.robinhendrix.com](http://www.robinhendrix.com), or contact Robin Hendrix at:

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