The Singers

Editor’s Introduction

I often ask British performers passing through Calgary what they think about the North American revival performers. The most consistent response is that they are fine instrumentalists but a bit weak on singing. Of course there are exceptions, but the general trend is toward valuing of instrumental over vocal technique. Numbers of North American performers treat singing as an afterthought to their instrumental talents, not realizing that the voice is a most complex thing requiring years of hard work to develop any mastery. To address this issue, and spurred on by Margaret Christl, I have asked a number of well-known singers to contribute their thoughts about singing and vocal technique. This will be run, one per issue, as they arrive under the banner – the singers. Watch for them over the next few issues. TBR.

The Voice

by Margaret Christl

The Voice. No other instrument is more capable of evoking a high level of emotion in a listener, than the human voice. It is very delicate and must be cared for continually. I have been teaching vocal exercises for 6 years and will present some of my ideas here.

BREATHING. All sound is produced in the body by AIR. How we distribute the air for singing, takes a bit of time, understanding and practice. Firstly, as you inhale, be aware that 90% of the air must go down to the bottom part of the lungs (the lungs are pear-shaped). Then blow the air out slowly (I encourage my students to stand in front of a mirror - to see how the breath is coming out - too fast or whatever).

DIAPHRAGMATIC MUSCLES are found between the rib-cage, just above the stomach. These muscles are for me the “table top” that supports the air, if the table is not well supported the whole thing collapses. As you breathe inwards this muscle should be quite taut. Keep it taut as you exhale the breath. If you do this 10 times a day, your singing will improve enormously. You’ll also feel a lot better because of all that extra oxygen getting into your system!

FACIAL MUSCLES are important in the placing of the sound. For instance if you’re singing an A (as in AMEN) in your lower register you should drop your jaw. (or as I call it “yawning”). However, if you’re singing A in a higher register, you must “smile” and lift your palette inside your mouth. This will accommodate the sound getting out without straining the vocal box. When you lift the palette you must support it with your facial muscles (under your cheekbones). By “yawning” and “smiling” you’re changing the shape of the vocal box and the “colour” of the same vowel.

RESPONSES. As with all instruments, different areas of the body produce different sounds. Of relevance here are the head, face and chest. However, it must be noted that whichever of these areas you are using, the placement or aim, is always the head. This also happens to be the hardest to work with.

SCALES. I teach my students that “scales” and these exercises have nothing to do with singing. They are merely techniques by which you may improve what God has given you. I start by doing simple scales SLOWLY and depending on the individual, gradually get more difficult and faster.

HOARSENESS AND LARYNGITIS. Any teacher worth their salt will tell you the only cure for these problems is total VOCAL REST - including speaking. If you continue to sing day after day when you’re hoarse you will eventually get NODES and possibly cause irreparable damage.

All of this of course is only a small part of singing properly. Working with a teacher occasionally is vital. It’s hard work and very tedious but IT DOES WORK!

I’m reminded of the Watersons (a fine acapella singing group from England), and it seems a good note upon which to conclude:

“SOUND, SOUND you instruments of Joy“