

The Tao of Singing

by Bruce Schoonmaker

There is an inmost centre in us all,
Where truth abides in fulness...
and, to KNOW,
Rather consists in opening out a way
Whence the imprisoned splendour may escape
--Robert Browning, Paracelsus

I believe that singing is a discipline and art that opens out a way for the imprisoned splendour within us to escape. It is a means for finding what is best and brightest within the singer, what resonates most beautifully within his soul. When we open ourselves to the immediacy and joy of singing, we move closer to wholeness, closer to awareness, empowered by a harmony within us that lacks no love and has no need to find fault. By making music, man expresses what is noblest, deepest, and most worthy in life. Those listening, those experiencing the art, resonate to this beauty and move toward the same wholeness, awareness, and harmony within themselves.

How do we open ourselves to that centre where Truth abides? We do so by adopting the disciplines of vocal training and musical study, and by learning interpretation and the art of musical phrasing. We gain enough vocal technique to warrant moving beyond it, enough to make it second nature, enough to forget it and sing. The pursuit of these disciplines creates within our beings a polarity of positive and negative energies, out of which we create real meaning to singing, meaning both intimate and vivid. This meaning will be different for each singer, but each singer must have his creative reason for singing, a reason that reaches deep within him and brings forth energy in abundance. This *raison d'être* or "love for singing" integrates the polarity within us, allowing us to create something very beautiful from the many different motivations for singing well.

The scenario for opening ourselves to the centre within may be something like this: the student wants to sing. He believes that he wants to improve his singing because he likes the applause that he receives. So he starts lessons, discovering the hard work involved in getting better. At the same time he discovers the negative side of hard work (frustration, long hours of tedious vocalises and repetition), he also discovers the positive side (improvement in how he sounds, more applause, compliments from those who hear him, and the joy of studying music). In placing himself actively between the poles of positive and negative energy in the discipline of singing, he integrates the energies into something creative, something new, something that binds the two polarities of energy into a double-helix of energy surrounding his art of singing.

He learns in performing the integration of energy that happens before an audience. Negative energies include frustration, stage fright, fear of judgment, shaking knees, and dry mouth. Positive energies include the internal response to applause, the self-fulfillment in creating beauty, and the stimulation of performing. The student integrates these positive and negative energies each time he performs, and each integration of energy draws the artist into the centre where Truth abides in fulness. He draws from the richness of this centre each time that he performs. This integration of energy opens the centre, allowing "the imprisoned splendour to escape." Tapping into this centre and allowing the splendour to escape through musical vocalism create the art of singing.

Ironically, opening to this centre becomes the real, vital reason for singing; the singer may have thought that he wanted to sing better in order to receive more adulation, but in actual fact he unconsciously sought the inmost centre. Performing and receiving applause are nice, but nothing compares with the joy of creativity, the joy of allowing one's imprisoned splendour to escape. It is a subtle pleasure, but one of immense power. It is a

singer's reason for being. When you see a singer receiving well-deserved applause, know that his deepest pleasure lies in the moment-to-moment creativity during the performance, not in the way the audience thanks him for his efforts.

The principle of positive-negative poles, the yin-yang in life, enables and empowers art. How often people theorize that without hardship and tragedy, art could not be created. How often people believe that art emerges only from the depths of a tormented soul. But doesn't every man and every woman suffer torments? Doesn't everyone resonate to tragedy and hardship?

It's a tragedy when people never suffer.

Even the wealthy, even the famous suffer petty disturbances and pains in life. Everyone meets death and everyone confronts the fear of death every day of her life.

Death and birth are two of the polarities representing yin-yang, the positive-negative flux of life. An artist places herself intentionally within this flux, within this creative tension. Discipline and freedom are creative polarities important in singing. The discipline of singing requires hours of commitment daily: breathing exercises, physical exercises, vocalizing, learning music, practicing, and practicing performing. The freedom of singing involves forgetting discipline intentionally, allowing the artist to perform effortlessly and ingenuously, with spontaneity and personal charm. The singer places herself in the flux of positive-negative polarity by searching for the drama within the text of what she sings and within the grand gesture of the music itself. Seeking the dramatic conflict, she places herself in the middle of conflicting energies, allowing the singing to integrate creatively those energies. How often professional singers lose touch with an operatic role by forgetting to place themselves within the conflict!

Only the serene artist places himself in conflict!

This process, of placing ourselves between the poles, of integrating positive and negative energies, allows the ego to subordinate itself to the creative self in such a way that the ego experiences a form of death, a stepping back or giving up of power, so that the creative moment can come, not channeled by control, but channeled by intuition and love. Part of learning to sing is learning to experience this ego-death. It can be painful and can evoke the emotions of fear and revulsion surrounding the prospect of physical death. The fear of death becomes a barrier to progress for the artist.

This fear forms a locus of power in our psyches that draws many other fears and pains-too-intense-to-confront to itself, a whirling focus of energy rarely tapped by those who move near it within themselves. Instead, they shy away from such energy and power because to use it would bring the fear to consciousness and would require their confronting the fear. Perhaps we should practice dying in order to confront how much power, how much feeling, how much energy we contain and how we can tap it for use every day. By overcoming our dread and loathing at approaching this locus, we can use its energy and power in positive ways. Meditation, Reiki, Yoga, Tai Chi, and Feldenkrais are positive methods of exploring the ego-death and unlocking the power within this locus.

Death and birth are powerful polarities, between which life resonates, integrating them into creative action. Singing, the discipline and performance, becomes a means of approaching ego-death in a beautiful way, tapping the power surrounding our fear of death and bringing it forward, to share with others in the form of music. The ancient Greeks believed in the healing power of music, the power of certain melodies and scales to transform consciousness, to bring about a positive change in the personality of those who performed it and those who listened to it.

Birth and death are two sides of the same coin. In life we stand between the mirror of birth and the mirror of death, knowing we

can't focus on unending images, but at the same time compelled to look beyond ourselves and to make meaning of what we see. And what we see is often confusing. But each of us has a locus of TRUTH abiding deep within, a place of great power and majesty. Often the fear of death forms a barrier to focusing in this centre; that is why teachers, directors, conductors, and coaches must understand the need for positive encouragement and patience in leading singers to this point. The art of building singers' capabilities integrates energies: stretching the body beyond the student's imagined limitations, stretching the psyche beyond what the student thought he could encompass, stretching the emotional being to encompass feelings and directive forces capable of bringing out of him colors and words that convey more than information, more than emotion, more than musicality, more than meaning. They bring out TRUTH. This is the derivation of "education," from the Latin "e-" meaning out, and "ducere," meaning to lead, draw, or bring.

Like the ancient legends of a language in which one cannot lie, singing must reflect intensely the qualities, the personality, the spirit and truth within the singer. It must come from that "centre where Truth abides in fulness." Such is the path of singing. Such is the path of the discipline that leads to singing. Such is the path of the teacher of singing, the artist who creates and coaches artists. The person who finds the true genius within others is the most worthy teacher. The person who believes in each person's genius and who is determined to find that genius and let it speak through the vehicle that we call The Singer, this is the teacher that we need to find, that we need to call upon within ourselves.

The polarity that we call DISCIPLINE must develop to its fullest extent. Singers need to take a hard look at the negative side of discipline. This is the part that requires time, commitment, a striving against futility, and throwing out the instant-gratification syndrome that infects so much of western culture. This is the part that can become a drudge, can become predictable, repeatable, that can quickly move into a "rut." But only from a

fully developed discipline and fully developed attitude of freedom can come the blossoming of the art of music. Integrating discipline and freedom opens the centre of Truth. And the realm of ideas, the images evoked by the words on this page, only dimly reflect the evocative, playful, childlike, and creative art, beauty, goodness and TRUTH that evolve from such an endeavor.

The voice student needs more than enlarging her knowledge, more than improving her technique, more than learning repertoire. What she needs is a paradigm shift in the way that she looks at the art, the way that she prepares herself, and the way that she values the beauty within her. We are miracles of creation. We are creatures of the stars. The atoms that comprise our bodies were present at the BIG BANG, and we are the stuff of such overwhelming creativity. We shift between matter and energy; since we now know that there is no difference between the two, we must learn to act in a way that honors this unity, that honors the beauty within us, that honors the creative urge and expressiveness within ourselves.

We need to look on singing as a process, not a thing, a verb not a noun, an energy not a matter, an art not a science. We will never know all there is to know about it and this unending process is not defeating; it is uplifting and centering, unifying and enlightening. It brings us energy and fulfillment. An ancient prayer says, "Stand before God with your mind in your heart." Here we reword it:

Sing before God with your mind in your heart