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Linguistic variants and their effects on the singing voice

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For a long time, diction in singing has certainly been a preoccupation for singers and their teachers, because to sing is essentially to communicate emotions through a text, even if the latter is full of onomatopoeias, and to obtain what we call : "aesthetic" pleasure, like in many vocal repertoire of contemporary music ...

Some time ago Christa Ludwig reminded us and affirmed this, by saying:

"Singing is not about making sounds, even if they are beautiful. The most important thing is to be able to tell someone a story." ¹

I agree with this approach to singing, even if I know that many colleagues, singers and teachers, and myself look primarily for good free sounds. I prefer to use the adjectif good for sounds and not beautiful because the latter adjectif it's too subjective.

When Christa Ludwig speaks about "telling a story" , this last word can include of course a series of phonemes articulated with emotion or, why not, without emotion, if the composer asks it of us, but, any way, these "sounds" must, at the end of the day, produce a reaction in an audience...

Unfortunately the approach to good lyric diction is generally summed up by the research into pure language; by the research into a model of diction that many coaches identify with the best spoken accent; for instance in Florence for Italian people, in Touraine for French, and so on...

A couple of years ago I was an auditor in a famous vocal professional training center, and I assisted many lessons, some of which were on Italian "repertoire". During a lesson on Laetitia's aria of "Gianni Schicchi", the soprano had some difficulties in singing the phrase "*vò andare in porta rossa*". In fact she pronounced "porta rossa" as her teacher wanted, with an absolute respect of Florentine pronunciation. Then she sang in ['pɔrta 'rossa] with an opened "o" [ɔ] for *porta* and a closed "o" [o] for *rossa*. But in these "o" vowels the vocal result wasn't good. Then the teacher, winking at me, because he knew that an Italian coach was in the audience, changed the opened sound in "porta" with a closed one, going towards an open "o" for "rossa", written in a lower note; the exact contrary of a pure Florentine pronunciation. (I remind you that these two words are written in a descending fourth from C

¹"(...) Chanter, ce n'est pas faire des sons, même très beaux. C'est d'abord savoir raconter une histoire." (in "Le quotidien" of 25/11/91, interviewed by Gérard Mannoni).

sharp for "porta" to G sharp for "rossa".) That musical reason, the descending fourth, explained the opportunity of this change, because this lady had some vocal problems with this vowel "o", and at that moment, the solution proposed by this teacher was very good for her singing voice. Unfortunately he didn't have the same attitude with all other arias that other singers sang during these masterclasses, and sometimes the "sacred" phantom of pure language came back to rectify many presumed mistakes, in "e" or "o" vowels, without giving the same attention to the vocal emission like in the example of Laretta's aria.

I have been convinced for a long time that singing language is not a pure language, wrongly identified as a standard language. The latter, for good linguists, is a "theoric" reference including many variants of a language.

When we sing, we don't need a pure language, but a "comfortable" language that must contribute to an ideal speech intelligibility, with respect for a free vocal expression.

Since the beginning of my coaching career I have noticed that some changes in language, give rise to a change in voice emission too... I became worried about the terrible responsibility that coaches can have when they intervene on the singing voice... I think that too many coaches deny that reality, thinking that they are not singing teachers. They prefer to ignore that, when they correct singers on language or intonation, for instance... Often they don't realise that they are interfering with vocal technique.

I do not particularly approve of the attitude of many Italian coaches who teach an Italian model of pronunciation without being aware of the problems of vocal technique. They often give a kind of diction which isn't adapted to different singers, because they don't have a good ear for the voice and they often modify a good vocal "emission" by claiming to adhere to a pure language... That problem concerns especially of course the student singers, when they are still learning how to obtain a good vocal technique, and less the professional ones, because they have learnt to cheat in these delicate situations.

My experience as a singer, and a singing teacher, has allowed me to study and explain the principles of lyric diction, and their specific relationship with the problems of vocal technique.

I think that a coach cannot correct singing language properly without knowing the function of the vocal tract and without having a good grasp of the aesthetic quality of the singing voice. Today, when I teach, giving special attention to diction, I am most interested in the position of the body, in the absence of tenseness in the jaw, in the neck, in the shoulders, in the pelvis, and so on.; and I often say to my students:

- "If you want to have good diction in singing, you have to feel good on your feet" -

To obtain a good definition of vowels I sometimes touch their head and their shoulders (trapezius) to be sure there is no tenseness. If we eliminate all kinds of tenseness, we are on the right track to obtaining

right colours in vowels. I think, that kind of training, is absolutely necessary when we teach the different languages to beginners...

Belcanto's singing, in its historical context; for instance, from Haëndel to Rossini, surely needs this kind of diction, without any tenseness. I am sure that to practice this repertoire, before the other ones, is a good way to achieve the best possible pronunciation, which doesn't go against a good and healthy vocal technique.

I think we could speak about the <<Belcanto approach to the language>>, which translated, in a "correct" technique of diction, some variants of Italian particularly adapted to this vocal style.

If we listen closely to many Italian singers, we can note that a lot of them are often very far from the "mythic" language of Florence, with regard for instance to the opening degree of vowels. Generally we can find few words with this Florentine pronunciation, but the majority of them are subject to some rules of the vocal technique, and also to the stage at which the student is, in his singing training. But this, doesn't mean that we have the right to transform the language completely, as some singers do with the help of their teachers, to obtain for instance a better legato, or better sounds in "note di passaggio"... I just would say that we can have a good Italian vowel definition, without the Florentine accent; and more, that the misinterpretation of the latter, can be harmful (nociva) to many voices.

I began many years ago a phonetic comparative transcription of some arias sung by different Italian singers, and I found that not one of them was continually consistent with the purist way to pronounce this language...

Do the same, and you'll be surprised too, and not only for the Italian repertoire. I did the same experiment on some other languages and I discovered the same problems with singers who represented for a lot of people in the singing field, a point of reference for good diction. I focussed for instance on the German article "der" in some lieder, sung by Dietrich Fischer Dieskau, the King of German Lyric Diction, and I found the same problems, because of the "vocalic harmonisation". In other words: a vowel's specific colour varies slightly according to the phonetic context...

If we have time I will play a tape for you, on which I have put together a collection of versions of the article "der", and you will notice that the colour of the "e" vowel varies from an open "e", towards an "a" position" (1), to a very closed "e", towards an "i" position" (2), not for vocal reasons, but because of the phonetic context... For instance, when "der" is followed by "nacht" (1) we have sometimes an open "e" and when it is followed by "liebe" (2) we sometimes have a very very closed "e"; because in fact the "e" of the article "der", prepares a kind of phonetic "space" for the following vowel. I use these examples, when I teach "diction and singing" in preparation for the French diplomas in singing voice teaching.

But for now, we are going to listen to, just two examples of a good Italian diction that respect the singers' origin and the particularities of their voices. We can perfectly understand the text they sing, but you'll notice some important differences in their approach to a word in the different ranges of the music. For the word "bellezza" for instance...

Listen to Tito Schipa ("Recondita armonia" recorded in 1913, when he was 24 years old) and Carlo Bergonzi ("Recondita armonia" recorded by DECCA CD 440 417-2)

Because we only have a short time I cannot play any other examples for you, but I can affirm that if Tito Schipa (who comes from the south of Italy/Lecce) sang in Italian like Carlo Bergonzi (who has a northern Italian accent), he would probably and quickly damage his voice; and the same goes for Bergonzi. In the past, good Italian vocal technique, that comes for the most part from the Italian language, respected more these different kinds of pronunciation, and accepted some nuances in singing language. Some different regional accents can be adapted into the singing language.

These two tenors show us that some other articulatory characteristics are more important than to say "bellezza" with an open or closed "e". They both have principally nasal articulations which are well integrated into the vowels.

This quality of nasalisation, that we hear in Bergonzi's and Schipa's voices can be found in many variants of a language; individual of course, but also regional, because of the coincidence of the specific phonetic history of different accents, that can have a great influence on the speaking voice.

But just a few of them keeps the vocal tract ready for healthy singing. Pure language cannot give us a good answer to the question: Which nasality?

The answer is found in some variants of a language.

With my lecture, I would like to attract your attention principally to the problem of these nasalisations, and I would like to underline one of principal characteristics of an **ideal** linguistic variant for singing, which is applicable to all languages...

The International Phonetic Alphabet doesn't resolve the ambiguity that we find in traditional writing for the different sounds represented by the letters "n" in words like "**n**ature" and "sou**nd**", or the letter "m" in words like "**m**other", **amb**itious, or, often in English: organis**m**, mechanis**m**, and that in comparison to the same French words: organis**m**e and mécanis**m**e.

These erroneous graphic interpretations, that unfortunately include the writing of API, causes (make) us to think that we use the same articulation "n" or "m" in all these words.

Indeed the "n" of **n**ature and the "m" of **m**other, or the french organis**m**e, are true nasal consonants, but the "n" of sou**nd** and the "m" of **amb**itious and organis**m**, in good diction, are some articulations that are very close to each other, and very close to a vowel. In a word like sou**nd** we just add a resonance to the vowel "u" and we can't consider that, like the "n" we pronounce in a word like **n**ature where the nasal sound is very concentrated because it becomes a true consonant. That articulatory function exists in all languages of the world, but, in some variants of them, it has an ideal physiological function.

We can define nasalisations this way: all letters "n" or "m"

- followed by another consonant like in the Italian: se**nto**, ma**nc**a, sa**ng**ue. For the latter ma**nc**a and sa**ng**ue, don't forget to use the same articulation as for the German "sa**ng**en, or the English thi**nk**ing. This

"n" sound is made, in Italian too, by the raising of the back of the tongue, to avoid a pronunciation like "aneche" that some Italian singers cherish without any valid reason;

Be careful also with the transformation of some "n" into some "m" nasalizations like in: invito, infiamma. To achieve this, you will notice that a labiodental articulation is necessary; that is to say an "m" articulated with the top front teeth on the bottom lip. To help my singing students to remember this, I have called it: "the Bugs Bunny m".

But we also have other transformations like the "n" in "non basta", "Don Pasquale", or the famous: "non piu mesta", "come un baleno rapido" (from Rossini's Cenerentola), which turns the "n" into an "m" sound.

We can define nasalizations also like: all letters "n" or "m"

- at the end of the words

like in the English "warm", "storm", "sun", "run";

or in German: "morgenn," "weiten", "langsamm", "stumm", and rarely in Italian sonn, siam, sian, because of the poetic language.

In the Count's aria from the Nozze di Figaro we can find : "e un ben che invan desio" where all these nasalizations are represented in this short phrase.

The only exception to that rule, in Italian for instance, is the word amnesia where "m" is followed by another consonant, where the latter is an "n". Thus the two letters of "amnesia" are in fact true nasal consonants.

We can at last define true nasal consonants, all the "n" or "m" letters that are

- between two vowels, like animal, minus, etc... or

- in the beginning of a word, followed by a vowel: for instance: now, may, etc... or

- after a consonant, like in the Italian apnea, amnesia in the English amnesty or the French ethnologie, arnaque, and so on...

Indeed this consonant is a very short and sharp (précis) nasal sound, with a very soft resonance, in comparison to the loud resonance of nasalizations.

The great French phonetician, Fernand Carton², distinguishes a nasal vowel from a nasalized vowel which has the same diction of a nasalization. He explained the quality of the nasalized vowel, by saying that the soft palate keeps a soft and free position.

- "*The soft palate in nasalized vowel, is slightly lower ("voile légèrement abaissé").*" - he says.

² CARTON Fernand, Introduction à la phonétique du Français, Paris 1974, Bordas, p. 40.

Hans Hotter said the same with a wonderful image "Our soft palate must be just like a bedsheet lifted by a gentle breeze". If our soft palate is like this, our mouth is ready to welcome our voices! And nasalisations, in their good diction, largely contribute to this welcome.

I hope you can see now, just how important this articulatory phenomenon of good nasalisation is for singing, because in bad diction it makes the soft palate tense and often in a down position. The latter is unfortunately the description we find in most phonetic books that describe nasal sounds without integrating them to a good conception of diction, and without the distinction I made between true nasal consonants and nasalisations. Indeed, they say that for vowels (oral phonemes) a soft palate is in a high position and for nasal consonants it is in a down position.

Fernand Carton, specifies in his book "an introduction to French phonetics", that a word like "chante" pronounced with a nasalisation, common in some southern French accents, and not with a true nasal vowel, like in the pure model of French, produces this articulation that we can say is ideal for singing.

And it's not by chance that many great French singers come from regions, where this articulation is very common.

If we don't caricature these accents, exaggerating their articulations, we prepare our vocal tract to receive a good vocal emission, if of course we know many other important mechanisms for achieving a good vocal technique (: an inner calm, an attitude of confidence in the singers when he sings, well opened vocal cords in the beginning of the sound, in other words a good onset in the position called: "deep breathing", a good technique for breathing too, and so on...)

An example of how this concept of good nasalisation has been put into practice , and its good effect on the singing voice, can be found in a phrase in the Countess' second aria : "di cangiar l'ingrato cor" from the "Nozze di Figaro".

Sometimes the sopranos are exhausted at the end of this aria and thus (ainsi) the ascending fourth to the top note, written in the middle of the word "can-giar" becomes difficult to sing. If we are very careful of this articulation "n" before the "g" of ca-ngiar, and we ask the singer to integrate it properly into the nasalisation of the vowel, or sometimes, in the worst scenario, to eliminate it completely, we can be sure to gain the best vocal result.

I remember that in a masterclass, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf , asked for this same kind of diction to obtain the best legato in a phrase like: im tode sein, in the famous Pamina's aria, and explained to a French singer how to avoid to saying "ime tode sein".

In fact it would be easier and phonetically more logical to pronounce, "in tode sein", with an "n", because of the consonant "t".

With regard to French language, it is essential that we distinguish the pure nasal vowel, that we can emit in some singing styles, like in Edith Piaf songs, from the nasalisation that can replace it, and which we need, in operatic repertory. But that's easier said than done.

In my opinion, for french melodies as well, it is absolutely necessary to use a nasalisation instead of "nasal vowels" of the pure French language, to obtain complete sounds, otherwise we risk, in articulating these phonemes, reducing our voices that after cannot be carried in a great hall or theatre. A lot of French singers of *mélodie française* were and are victims of this misunderstanding of diction in singing.

In my relative short time in teaching, I unfortunately have known some young French singers who have quickly finished their operatic careers, because they were slaves to an absurd conception of diction in singing that damaged in the long run, their vocal tracts, because it was not adapted to the long range and the "tessitura" of the classical vocal repertoire. And this, is more true in France than in any other country.

I think that the adherence to a strong and erroneous conception of the pronunciation of French language is one of the principal reasons why French singers have a bad reputation in the world. And I would like to insist that it's not the french language which is guilty of the french predicament in singing, like some people have said, but a bad aesthetic of its diction³ in the purist conception of this language that dates back to the seventeenth century. Indeed at this time, the "strained front phonetic mode" ("mode phonétique tendu et antérieur")⁴, as the Swiss linguist Edouard Joseph Matte said, came into the french official language. I have no time to develop this argument but it was necessary to give you these historical reasons for that particularity in french diction.

Good nasalisation, that we can find in many French accents for instance, can take therefore the place of the pure nasal vowels, and will make the emission of vocal pop music easier too. And, what's more, in the singing voice, these articulations can hide a very strong regional accent present in the speaking voice...

I would like to finish my lecture by showing you an extract of a videotape of Celine Dion, singing in French, because she made a similar comment on the subject as Andrea Guyot did; Andrea Guyot, the famous French lyric soprano who sang Micaëla in the recording of Carmen with Maria Callas...

In fact, both singers have very strong regional accents in their speaking voices: a Canadian accent for Celine Dion and a southern French accent for Andrea Guyot, who is from Nimes.

C. Dion affirmed, in an interview, that her accent is hidden in singing, without any conscious effort on her part, and the result is a singing language very close to standard French. I had the chance to hear quite the same statement by A. Guyot who taught singing in the National Conservatoire de Paris, where we were colleagues for a short time.

I just would add that the phonetic reasons for this hiding of a strong regional accent are principally in the quality of the nasalisation of their speaking voices. Unfortunately, some French singing teachers who understand this detail of diction, exaggerate this articulation and they often caricature the French language in an unacceptable way. The truth lies in a happy medium... that respects a standard way of speaking.

³ ZEDDA Paolo, *Esthétique de la diction française, entre Tradition et phonétique de la langue chantée*, in: "La mélodie française; Actes du Colloque", AFPC, Paris 1995, pp. 67 to 93.

⁴ MATTE Edouard Joseph, *Histoire des Modes phonétiques du Français*, Genève 1982, Droz; from p. 57 to p. 64 and from p. 138 to p. 146.

I hope you can notice the difference between her diction in speaking voice and in singing voice.

Look at the Video-tape of "Céline Dion , Live à Paris" (SMV 200704); N° 17: "Quand on n'a que l'amour"... Please, be careful to the pronounciation, in singing, of the sentences:

(...)pour unique raison(...) and (...)pour unique chanson(...)

Finally we can say that some variants in languages have some articulatory practices, like good nasalisations, that make singing easier. We should recognise and advocate them for standard languages, because they contribute towards good voice expression and, above all, to a good and healthy use of the vocal tract. I think, on the contrary, that the search for singing a "pure" language, can often make, like I demonstrated for French singing, as much damage to vocal emission as a bad vocal technique... And that can be true for the Italian language too!

In teaching we should give advice on lyric diction sparingly, and according to the different levels of our students, and their degree of awareness of their own vocal technique. Some of them need more vowels in a certain period, to obtain perhaps a better legato, and others need more incisive consonants to have good onsets; but at first, our aim in singing diction should be, to obtain the same articulatory "place" for vowels and nasalisations, to prepare a good voice resonance.

A good understanding of the singing language depends on the quality of our ear of course, and a lot of singing teachers and coaches don't ask themselves enough if they have a good aesthetic of the language in singing, and often they hide this gap in their knowledge with a search for the "pure language" which has just few possibilities in its diction, whereas the "standard language" accepts many variants with a greater respect for the particularities of each singer, like we established for Tito Schipa and Carlo Bergonzi before.

On that note I'd like to thank you very much for your kind attention and for listening to me with such patience.

Paolo ZEDDA