

THE VOICE AS AN INSTRUMENT

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The Voice as an Instrument by A. A. Pattou

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“Although nature has gifted us all with voices, yet, correct singing is the result of art and study.”

These words of Aristotle, the Grecian philosopher, were not more true two thousand years ago than they are at the present day. Even now the truth of this observation is neither understood and admitted in theory, nor recognised in practice; for, any person who is gifted by nature with a fair voice, is generally considered capable of being a singer, without special study of the vocal organs; and even without special training in the art of musical expression. How much time, indeed, do singers generally devote to studying, scientifically and practically, the wonderful mechanism of their voice? How much serious study do even the teachers of vocal music give to the cultivation of their own voices?

And how many of them are capable of accounting scientifically for the most common defects in the human voice?

Few indeed is the number of those who are capable of removing the defects of an unnatural voice by the employment of appropriate and well directed efforts, or of restoring such a voice to natural beauty by the use of scientific methods. Instead of being guided by positive knowledge in the cultivation of the voice, teachers are too often obliged to rely upon the uncertain results of a very miscellaneous preparation. In many cases the notions upon which their teaching is based have never been subjected to a scientific analysis.

In short, the fact which was announced two thousand years ago, that correct singing is the result of art and study, is generally ignored to-day; and this explains our slight progress in the most enjoyable of all the arts, and accounts for the low standard of vocal culture everywhere.

Names eminent in other arts, or distinguished in other sciences than vocal culture, are not few in number, yet those who have judiciously mastered the mechanism of the human voice, who by diligent attention to their art, have obtained perfect control of their voices, and who therefore may justly be regarded as great vocal interpreters, are so few in number, that they may be counted upon your fingers; their names are familiar to all of you. They are capable of rendering in song every emotion of the human soul.

But do you object that a perfectly cultivated voice is not essential to singing? Then let me ask, does not the effect to be obtained in the instrumental rendering of a musical composition depend mainly upon the quality of the instrument? And how many a singer, though possessed of a soul overflowing with grand aspirations, and though yearning to utter them in glorious song, is forever precluded from that high privilege by the meagreness, or defective qualities of that instrument, his own voice?

It is intended at the present time, to speak of the *technique* and practical use of the voice, regarded as an instrument of vocal utterance; from which will perhaps appear the truth of the words above quoted, namely, that the correct use of the voice is the result of art and study.

Let us examine the mechanism of our instrument, and let us consider what manner of using the same is proper, natural and correct; also, what manner and methods are not so. Then will appear the pleasant and healthful results of using that instrument aright, as well as the injurious and disastrous consequences of abusing it.

An exhaustive consideration of the æsthetics of our art, and a technical and anatomical examination of the structure and hygiene of the vocal organs are alike foreign to our present purpose. For fuller treatment of these subjects, reference may be had to the standard special treatises.

In what does the vocal machinery chiefly consist ?

It is naturally divided into four parts:

Firstly—The motive power, or breath;

Secondly—The larynx, which forms the tone;

Thirdly—The pharynx, which colors the tone;

Fourthly—The organs of articulation.

The air supply and motive power of the voice is breath. The levers which control this motive power are the diaphragmatic and abdominal muscles, which act on the base of the lungs, and thus are instrumental in holding and regulating the breath during the process of expulsion in singing. A breath for singing is normal, or natural and hygienic, when its central expansion is at the waist. It is the exaggerated breath of sleep, or of perfect repose. If you will quietly and slowly sip the air through your lips, without lifting your shoulders, you will feel your waist expanding, and you will thus illustrate the natural breath for singing.

It follows from this, not only that singers

should secure freedom of dress and motion about the throat and neck, but also and particularly that they should give free play to the base of the lungs. They should scrupulously and always allow room for the expansion and development of the lungs, and I attribute to no other cause, than the neglect of this simple precept, the fact, that many lady singers breathe from the upper chest, instead of from the diaphragm. Breathing diaphragmatically, or abdominally, fills the lungs to their full capacity, and by this means not only develops and strengthens the lungs themselves, but also exerts a most salutary influence upon the general health.

A very simple but effective breathing exercise is as follows: your watch in hand, sip the air as slowly as possible through your lips, till the lungs are filled; hold the breath in your lungs as many seconds as it took to fill them, and exhale during the same length of time, as was occupied by the inhalation. This should be repeated,