

## **A study of the importance of vocal energy on classical singing**

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**Abstract:** *This essay studies the importance of vocal energy on the performance of classical singing. For this study a research was made based on both watching and performing in vocal masterclasses in New York city and in vocal summer festivals in Canada, United States of America, France and Portugal, where I identified common misunderstanding concepts regarding energy versus tension. These findings were sustained by consulting bibliography on vocal pedagogy, confirming that it frequently happens to singers. To address this problem, I formulated a method based on bibliography and on the discussion with vocal experts and applied it to individual singers of different performance levels and backgrounds. The results were revelatory on a clearer vocal timbre, a deeper musicality and a richer vocal performance.*

Key-words: *vocal performance, energy, tension, singers, technique.*

### **1. Introduction**

Along the journey of a classical trained singer one has to go over many levels of performance and auditions in the professional world, and a very important milestone is to attend and perform on public masterclasses. There, you are judged by an expert and by an audience. The expert usually gives you many advices on your interpretation, phrasing, dynamics and vocal technique, breathing, projection and many other details. Performing in front of an audience is a challenge but performing and being taught at the same time by an important musician in an environment with spectators is truly demanding and can raise the stamina. Recent studies have proven that there are singers who perform much better under stress (Emmons and Thomas, 2008).

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The demands require singers to be on their highest level, to be totally in charge of their vocal instrument and this can make them very nervous and to not perform well enough due to performance stress. (Emmons & Thomas, 2008)

As both a professional singer and a voice teacher, I have witnessed this scenario in a great variety of settings world wide, and I believe that many times the performer was not giving his best because of a misunderstanding of technique concepts, resulting in a lack of motivation that is essential when working with a teacher (Stephenson, 2018). This is the reason that took me to write this article, to clarify some common misunderstandings of technical concepts regarding voice technique.

In New York city I attended several masterclasses with Marilyn Horne, Denyce Graves, Thomas Hampson, Regina Resnik and Regine Crespin and it has been to my observation that one regularly hears the same concepts and ideas addressed and discussed in many different ways. Issues such as breathing technique (diaphragmatic vs. abdominal), position of the soft palate (always high and lifted vs. dependent on the vowel that is being sung), body posture, projection, relaxation were all addressed at these public masterclasses. Also, when attending summer vocal programs with the International Vocal Arts Institute (IVAI) in Montreal, Canada, for 3 weeks I observed voice lessons taught by great expertise faculty (performers such as Joan Dornemann, Mignon Dunn, Laura Brooks Rice and Diana Soviero). In this program they all worked on *bel canto*, on how the breathing process should be, on the importance of using dynamics as a way of expressing the text, on how you should position your diaphragm while sustaining a note, on the importance of not neglecting the sixteen notes written and singing them, on the easiness you should always have, the sensation of calm and relaxing while singing. In another year, I attended the same program in Virginia, USA, where we worked on the position of the mouth, on breathing, on how to pronounce the french diction without mistakes and giving a specific nuance, on your tongue muscle, on how to sing *legato* with easiness of *vibrato* on the phrase, on lifting your soft palate and on being relaxed again. At the Academie Internationale de Nice, France and at Casa de Mateus, in Portugal, both with Lorraine Nubar and Dalton Baldwin, I performed in summer programs where we worked on interpretation, vocal energy, air spinning, control of dynamics, high placement of your voice to bring more harmonics and relaxation.

During this journey of attending and performing on these masterclasses I had the chance to listen to many colleagues and got the opportunity to discuss their opinions and their different points of view. What was transversal to everyone was the fact that all masters used the word relaxing and that a singer should be relaxed. But this was also when a problem occurred: many singers, when instructed to relax,

start to lose energy and become so soft that their singing loses placement, freedom and resonance.

The definition of relaxation, according to do the Cambridge dictionary (2013) is, “a pleasant activity that makes you became calm and less worried”. Applying this concept to classical singing there is a clear goal: that a singer should always look that his singing has no effort at all, that it is calm. The imagery of a singer while performing an aria or a recital of *lied* or other type of songs is essential to have this picture to create the right mood and set of a song (Moore, 1978).

This is how we get to the focus of this article: the concept of relaxing during the process of singing as well as the instruction to simply relax. Such apparently positive concept, which is so frequently used in the teaching of singing, does not always result in the desired outcome physically.

A study made by Ware (2013) states that many voice teachers have a need for a better communication. In this aspect I believe that using the word relax or relaxation to achieve the desired vocal sound is not the best solution for singers. I have often asked why the word energy and/or the concept of energizing the vocal tone is neglected or often absent in some voice teacher’s vocabularies. The most common answer I am given is that using these terms make singers to become very tense. While I truly can understand this answer, one must find a way of using the right amount of energy while singing without becoming tense. The word energy can give the singer an imagery of tension and according to Ware (2013) the tendency of voice teachers using imagery and science for their students is increasing.

## 2. Objectives

On writing this essay my goal is to alert the singer, performer and teacher of classical singing to the importance of using energy during his performance:

- a) to be conscious of the importance of using energy while singing because, by being aware of this use, one becomes more conscient and, even when instructed to relax, won’t disregard the energy while performing;
- b) give practical solutions and a method that is used by singers of different performance backgrounds;
- c) by using vocal energy one can reach a very high level of vocal performance revealing a much richer interpretation;
- d) to understand that tension and energy are two distinguished forms and many times are confused by the singer.

### 3. Methodology

To investigate the misuse of energy versus tension, I observed 20 singers of different backgrounds and nationalities. Their ages were from 18 to 33 years old. Concerning to gender, 5 were men and 15 were women. Regarding their levels, 9 were students, 6 were semi-professional and 5 were professional singers.

I evaluated them on breathing support, resonance and placement. Each, were working on their own songs, and were asked to sing them in two different ways:

A. They were instructed to sing their song or aria but being on a relaxed mode.

B. They were then instructed to sing the same song or aria but to have more energy on their singing, being very specific on the mechanic part of their singing, using the following method:

1. before singing the first note of their vocal exercise, they had to create the sensation of the air arriving first in their resonators and preceding the onset of the vocal sound;
2. energetically articulate the consonants, most specially those at the beginning of the words<sup>2</sup>;
3. while producing sound, feel the air always flowing on the soft palate;
4. while sustaining a note, create the sensation of singing the same vowel many times.

### 4. Results and Discussions

When following scenario A, where the singers were asked to sing in the relaxed mode, I observed that 16 of them lost resonance and placement and 18 became soft on their breathing and lost support several times.

When following the method proposed in scenario B, the results revealed that 19 of the singers improved their breathing support constantly, 17 always kept their resonance and 20 of them never lost their placement.

Based on these results, it was clear that singers, when asked to be energetic on their singing, obtained a more solid and free sound.

Miller clarifies that energy in singing is equal to energy of air spinning through the vocal resonators and a too relaxed singer can easily misunderstand this very important aspect of vocal technique (Miller, 1993). The author explains that the spin of air is achieved through muscle tonus, aka energy, and the use of the diaphragm which then results in a free sound which is both brilliant and focused

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<sup>2</sup> Manuel Garcia explains this when he writes about explosive consonants. GARCIA, M. Hints on Singing, Forgotten books, 2012.

(Miller, 1993). On the other hand, despite the objective of asking a singer to relax is to avoid tension and consequent damage of the vocal chords, relaxing does not imply that vocal delivery becomes more efficient (Harrison, 2006).

The author Richard Miller (1993, 122), addresses this issue:

“the yawn-sigh technique is still found among some teachers who believe singing should always feel relaxed. Such doctrine is ruinous for tenors. Muscle tonus is essential in all singing (...).”

Also, the author refers more specifically that:

“one of the most detrimental approaches to breath coordination is based upon false assumptions about relaxation during singing, but muscle tonus is vital to all energized physical action.” (Miller 1993, 26)

However, during masterclasses, some experts only used the term relax sensation, and used it several times, thus giving the singer a feedback that they were too tense. Consequently, the singers reacted by being softer, so much that there was no energy and no *legato* on their singing.

Author Jerome Hines, in his collection of conversations with famous opera singers about vocal technique, got many times an opposite feedback, that singing should always be and feel relaxed. When searching to understand this answer, because I believe singing should have energy, I had a lesson with an acclaimed voice teacher who agreed with my point of view and demonstrated the difference between energy and tension by showing how the arms are used to lift a large bag full of groceries: if the arms are too loose and relaxed, it will be next to impossible to lift the bag; likewise, if the arms are too tensed it will take a tremendous physical effort to lift the bag; but with energized and focused muscular momentum, lifting the heavy grocery bag is accomplished easily and with minimal effort. The same thing will occur in vocal technique.

After some research, I understood that right after inhalation, and with the onset of sound, the singer must feel and be energized throughout his body with air spinning in the vocal resonators while vocal sound is being produced (Miller, 1993); it's a question of balance and the right amount of energy.

When singing a scale throughout the entire vocal range and while utilizing the energy of air spinning throughout the full range, always starting in this manner at the beginning of the vocal exercise, the singer will obtain an open throat and a brilliant, focused vocal sound.

## 5. Conclusions

Based on the research and the experiments described above, it is clear that it is very important to use energy in singing, providing a much richer and free sound, thus contributing for an exquisite performance.

When teaching, it is important to have in mind that vocal energy is essential for vocal performance for audible results as the sound becomes more even and with easy projection and a natural brilliancy. Nevertheless, it is also critically important for singers to avoid tension in their bodies as it is to avoid an overly relaxed body, because with one or with the other a singer won't be able to perform to his best.

Even when instructed to relax, a singer should be able to separate the idea of becoming weak and with no stamina in his body from the idea of being calm but with energetic singing. Singing with energy is required to produce a rich sound with harmonics, capable of projecting the vocal instrument in ensembles or over an orchestra in a large hall, in order to achieve an overwhelming vocal performance.

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