

Vocal Education Series

Part 3 - Vocal Technic: Fact or Fiction?

By René Torres

In the first two articles of this series, we dealt with warming up the vocal mechanism and breathing efficiently as you sing. This part will deal with singing efficiently.

Before you ask the question, yes, *technic* is a word. It is just as valid as *technique*. In music education circles, mostly eccentric European, *technic* is used as a catchall word for the study of voice placement and tone production.

Sergius Kagen, a veritable institution at the Julliard School of Music, once stated that the aim of vocal technic is “to enable the singer to produce, at will and with reasonable ease, sounds of specified pitch, duration, quality, volume, color, etc.” (Yes, he called it *technic*, too). Given this definition, we can see that the study of *technic* is of primary importance to all singers, no matter what genre is being sung. The reason is that, whether opera or barbershop, the techniques for developing an efficient voice are fundamentally the same. An efficient voice can either pierce through a 75-piece orchestra or blend with 100 voices in whisper-quiet tones.

Tonal efficiency.

The quest for a beautiful voice has been the subject of many a treatise and lively discussion. Any time you deal with a subjective term such as *beauty*, opinions can vary widely. *Efficiency*, however, is another matter. Efficiency in vocal production causes relaxation in tonal production which, in turn, produces a natural sound.

Consistency leads to efficient singing. This means that every time a given pitch is sung at a given volume, it should be sung the same way every time. When we speak, we don't think of a meaning and then find a word sound for it. Rather, we have a merged image in our minds of a meaning and a word sound. There should be no distinction between the meaning and the sound. Therefore, the goal of the singer should be to achieve a consolidation of lyrics and music when learning a song. One should approach the process of learning a song like learning a new language.

Emotions and sounds.

In the case of a spoken language, the effort is much less, of course. First, you have been speaking for a long time, and you do it every day. It has become second nature. Also, you use emotional nuances (inflections) as added effects, and they are not always the same each time. For example, you could say the word “love” forty times, and each time the inflection imparted by the emotions would vary depending on the circumstances. In essence, you have a file in your brain of words/sounds and a separate one for emotions/inflections. These are combined as the need dictates.

You don't have that privilege when singing a song. Sure you can mix and match these files, but you should be aware of maintaining pitch, forming vowels, and controlling volumes. Beyond this, you have little control over the timing of these items because it is usually better to sing the same thing at the same time as everyone else around you. Right!

An important milestone.

Success in your vocal development will come when you consistently imagine sounds at will.

Truly polished singers imagine these characteristics and, moreover, they have the ability to add the full complexity of the sound: color, timber, quality, intensity and resonance.

When the average barbershopper is confronted with this mind-numbing array of things to do at once, his usual reaction is to learn the words and music, and leave the rest to chance. As you have probably guessed, that is not enough.

A work of art.

A song is a piece of art composed with the intention that it be performed. As a whole work, a song, if properly composed, is an embodiment of a complete idea. Therefore, it is the duty of the interpreter to adhere as closely as possible to the composer's concept. The singer's flexibility with the piece is therefore restricted. Large egos notwithstanding, singers are tools of the composer and are what bring about fruition of the piece. Granted, the performer can take liberties, but the composer pretty much "calls the shots."

The key to efficient singing.

Learn the "language" of the song and imprint it in your mind so you can sing it the same way every time. In the case of a chorus member, chances are the director will go through these steps and give you the overall "feel" for the song through directions and instructions. In any case, try the following steps yourself, and it will probably be easier for you to interpret the song as you are directed.

1. First, sit down and read the lyrics. Get a feel for what the composer is trying to convey. Try to visualize the setting the lyrics refer to and understand what the composer is trying to say in context of that setting. This will give you a basic idea of the meaning of the song. For example, if the song was composed for a movie, see the movie and note how it ties into the overall story. The same is true for a musical, etc.
2. Play or hear the music without looking at the lyrics. Let your mind form its own opinion of the feelings it evokes. This is sometimes called "seeing a tone poem." Place these evoked feelings in the context of the song's era and reconcile your emotions with the rest of the information. Then, read the lyrics as you hear the music, and see how each complements the other. Now you can begin to sing the piece and see how you can add your talents to those of the composer. As you sing, try for an overall "imprinting" of all the characteristics you feel.

Songs take on a character of their own as you delve deeper into their inner workings. If you take the time to learn the language of music and practice consistently, it will make for a more efficient voice.

Form a mental image.

Notice there has been no mention of the *mechanical* aspects of singing. This is because, as mentioned in a previous article, the emphasis should be on proper breathing. To emphasize mechanical approaches to singing tends to produce singers that are more conscious of their muscular activities than the mental sound image. If you spend more time thinking about where

your tongue should be, this detracts from the mental picture you should be having. The good thing about having a proper, precise and consistent mental image is that the body will put the tongue where it needs to be without you consciously telling it where to go. The same thing is true for the rest of your body parts. Concentrate on the mind and the body will follow. People have become scratch golfers by playing golf in their heads as much as on the course. *Singing is no different.*

Be confident.

You have to be confident in yourself—and relaxed and comfortable with your technique—to imagine yourself “naked” on stage. That’s a lot to ask for, but if you think about it, aren’t you “laying yourself bare” every time you sing? If you aren’t, you’re not giving your all, and it will show.