

Vocal Education Series

Part 9: The Smart Singer

By René Torres

There is a common misconception that the voice can be trained to work – or rather that it can be made to work consciously. However, as we will see, the “voice” responds in its own way to external stimuli that affect vocal pitch, intensity, and vowel sounds. It interprets what you wish to convey and decides what needs to be done to make it so. Therefore, the trick to “smart singing” is to somehow find a way to exercise your volition on these involuntary responses.

Singing: Art or science?

There is no way to consciously control certain functions of the body. For example, you cannot stop the beating of your heart or the digestive process. By the same token, vocal production--a combination of muscle contraction and relaxation--is also beyond your direct control. The only voluntary tool that you have for good vocal production is the establishment of good muscle memory patterns. In that sense, singing is both a science and an art. You could wax ecstatically on the virtues of functional laws and vocal physiology or, conversely, write tomes about the “art” of singing without regard for the mechanics. But both need to work together. You could say that the “artistic” part is what you put in; the “physical” part, what comes out as a result.

A singer can make beautiful sounds only to the extent that his or her vocal apparatus--pharynx, tongue, palate, head cavities, jaw, lips, teeth, lungs, diaphragm, and all muscles and sinews--is healthy. This is the physical part of singing, the part that follows physical laws. But as stated earlier, there is more to singing than that. The extra ingredient--the “art” part of singing--must also be addressed. So how do you blend the two? How do you consistently merge science and art? How do you balance everything so that you sing smartly? Let’s explore further what it takes to be a smart singer.

Understanding the singing voice

Breathing is a natural function--something you do naturally. Likewise, speaking is communicative process for making yourself understood. You don’t have to do it in time, in rhythm, or necessarily on pitch. Therefore, it, too, is not complicated or unnatural. There are myriad varieties of speaking voices and, for the most part, you can make yourself understood without any complicated training.

Singing, however, is another matter. Here you need rhythm, pitch, inflection, tone, and volume to meld into a cohesive whole. Furthermore, there is a constantly changing mix of vocal qualities as a song progresses to its conclusion. Vocal training is essential because, in singing, the voice and respiratory organs are being used in an untypical or abnormal (non-speaking) manner. Singing, therefore, is not natural in the truest sense of the word. And, sadly, many teaching techniques do not take this into consideration. Too frequently, singing becomes “habitual” instead of “correct.” Habitual singing is not necessarily correct, except in those persons with innate, highly-developed singing abilities. And for that you need to train the voice.

The trick to smart singing is to be in control by virtue of self-awareness as opposed to direct control of the voice. There is a world of difference here. True success is achieved when the singer realizes that he or she has made contact with the correct set of functions at any given moment. This is sometimes referred to as the development of muscle memory. Much practice and introspection is needed to get to the point where this can be achieved. And, you need someone to help you with it. It's not something you can do by yourself. Why? Because what you hear and perceive is of necessity influenced by your body physics.

Haven't you ever heard yourself on a recording and said, "That's not me. I don't sound like that?" The reality is that you probably are hearing a closer representation of what others hear than you think. When you hear yourself, you are hearing not just through the air, but also through bone conduction and physio-kinetic vibrations in your body. It is not what others hear or feel.

Developing aesthetic judgment

There is another essential component of smart singing that is based on the principle that certain sounds or tonal qualities are more pleasing or desired than others. Of course, this is a matter of subjectivity that often gives rise to discussion and controversy. No one will deny, however, that there are some sounds (singing voices) that are more pleasing to the ear than others. We should not debate which are more pleasing but, rather, agree that there is an aesthetic side to singing and that it must be cultivated and trained.

Each person has a basic quality in his or her voice that is intrinsic to that individual. This quality—combining personality and physiology—can, in the strictest sense, be called the "natural" beauty of one's singing voice. This is what distinguishes Barbra Streisand from Madonna. Both have singing voices considered "aesthetically pleasing" by a cadre of followers, but they are not necessarily the same group of people.

Quoting the famous French author Antoine de Saint-Exupery: "Perfection is achieved not when there is nothing left to add, but when there is nothing left to take away."

What does all this have to do with barbershop? Well, if you start from the premise that smart singing is smart singing whether you're speaking of jazz, opera or country music, then it behooves you to be the smartest singer you can be within our own genre. You should strive to combine good vocal techniques with proper aesthetic qualities in such a way that it reflects the best that you can do. Record and listen to yourself often. Develop an approach to practice whereby you can get constructive criticism from those who can help you. Take singing lessons. Pay attention to your section leaders and directors. Attend Harmony College. Participate in craft sessions. All these things will help you to become a smarter singer.