

## Vocal Education Series

### **Part 14: A Methodic Approach to Artistic Singing**

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Up to now this series has dealt with the “left-brain” side of singing—the warm-up, breath control, vocal techniques, and more. But there is another aspect of singing, the “right-brain” side that deals with the artistry of a performance. Let’s look at the methodology required to deliver an artistic performance and, above all, make it a truly communicative experience.

Achieving true connection with an audience is the result of experience gained from four stages of personal growth as a singer and performer. These stages are described below.

#### **Stage 1: Developing basic knowledge and understanding**

In any group of amateur singers, there are always a number of novices—singers without training and experience. Not only are they not experienced; they probably are *unaware* that they are not very knowledgeable. At this stage the best improvement approach is to instill a basic awareness of the advantages of music education for the singer. The premise here is to develop an understanding of singing methods and principles, and work on vocal techniques at a very basic level. Singers at this stage should be made to understand that there is a need to be open to learning proper vocal techniques and developing a sense of singing acuity.

#### **Stage 2: Unlearning bad habits, learning new skills**

The singer then advances and begins to realize he may not be experienced, but now at least he is *aware* that he isn’t. At this point, additional music education is introduced with focus on skills acquisition (posture, tuning, breathing, tone production, etc.).

Instilling, developing and perfecting the mechanical aspects of vocal production take the longest amount of time for a singer because it usually involves the unlearning of bad habits and learning of new ones. Learning new skills can be difficult, especially when old habits are firmly ingrained in the subconscious.

#### **Stage 3: Shifting to the right**

Persistence in developing these skills will result in a more competent singer, one who is now *aware* of his competency. Refinements of singing techniques learned make for increased mastery and an ever-improving singer. This stage is very dependent on the degree of personal commitment. Many singers are content with having a working knowledge of singing, and may feel there is no need to develop further. However, there is a “whole ‘nuther world out there.” At this point, primary emphasis should be shifted to the comprehensive development of the artistic elements of the performance. The shift to “right-brain” singing needs to begin.

#### **Stage 4: Mastering the expressive side of singing**

At this stage the subconscious side of singing comes into play. There is a sense of *transparency* as to how and when the learned techniques are used. The purely technical aspects of singing are no longer an issue, but rather the emphasis is on consistency, musicality, self-expression, and communication with the audience. In other words, the right side of the brain now takes over from the left side. Muscle memory has been developed regarding the singing techniques to where they are not consciously invoked. They are now part of a bag of tools to be called forth as necessary to express the art and communicate the song to the listener.

If you look at these four stages as a process, it seems that the artistry does not come into play until the last stage. But there are really some artistic elements embedded at each stage. Let's see how a performance can be improved artistically regardless at what "stage" you feel you are performing.

Even if you are at the most elementary stage of the performance process, you can still give a heartfelt performance. Sing like you mean it. Better yet, mean it when you sing. Study the lyrics. Feel the emotion of the words. Ask yourself what the intent of the lyricist was when he penned the words. Can you relate to that emotion? Can you then take that emotion and associate it with something in your own life? Then can you convey that feeling to your audience as you sing the piece?

As you progress along the first of the stages, strive to improve the quality of the heartfelt singing. Let your posture, gestures, and animated facial expressions become tools for the furtherance of the artistic elements of your performance. As you progress further along the path, additional refinements can include nuances such as incorporating the breaths as part of the conveyance of emotions. Others naturally follow, such as more subtle expressions with the face and body and changes of vocal color to convey moods.

As you strive to reach the "unconsciously competent" final stage, you essentially work to forget about your singing techniques and artistic elements. This is the stage where you just simply LIVE the experience on stage without having to worry about technique because it has become second nature. You are relaxed, comfortable with the words and the music, and concentrating only in feeling the song and the moment. It may even be that time slows down for you and you may feel outside of yourself, as if watching the performance through the eyes of another. This is the ultimate experience! If you craft your experience in this manner, you will find that the audience connects with you like you never imagined. Communication is complete, and the performance is truly a sharing—a contagious empathy with your emotion.

So, don't concentrate your skill building on just the mechanistic aspects of vocal performance. Save a little learning room to improve the performance by striving to always sing "from the heart." If you incorporate this "emotional" right-brain function with your other "mechanistic" left-brain ones, you will become a more complete singer—more capable of communicating with the audience on a higher level—no matter at what stage you feel yourself to be.