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Thesis/Portfolio

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THINKING ABOUT THOUGHTS

“To expatiate upon the importance of thought would be absurd. . . More relevant to our purpose is the question how thought is important, for an answer to this question will throw light upon the kind of training thought requires if it is to subserve its end.”

John Dewey

Here let me explain something about why this work around authenticity and integration has a direct and important impact on my work as a singer and voice teacher. First of all, a voice is a very telling expression of one's sense of self. I have often felt that one's voice isn't so much an expression of who they are; it's an expression of who they *think* they are. In Kristin Linklater's book *Freeing the Natural Voice*, she discusses the concept of “primary impulses” and “secondary impulses,” her description of the ways a voice can be used for expressions of a person's needs, wants, emotions, and thoughts. She theorizes about how early in a child's life they are often conditioned out of their instinctive, primary vocal gestures into socially acceptable ways of communicating, or a diversion into secondary impulses. This imposed need to “think before you speak,” for better or worse, does have an impact not only on the timing of one's vocal use, the choice of words and inflections, etc., but also on the very tone and quality of the voice. I have long been aware of this phenomenon; I have studied it with my own voice and have worked on this level with my students. Reading how Linklater articulated it confirmed my understanding in this area and gave me new vocabulary to describe it.

Every conscious and subconscious thought affects the vocal mechanism, the respiratory muscles that control the flow of breath throughout the system, and the tensesity of the entire body. Granted, these effects are sometimes so minute that they might go unnoticed, but they are always there. I will repeat: **whether we are aware of it**

or not, and whether we like it or not, every conscious and subconscious thought affects the voice. Thus, it behooves every singer and actor to understand this fact and to monitor their thoughts continuously.

Now, sometimes we don't appear to have a choice as to the thoughts that come to us, and, in fact, this phenomenon is one of the aspects of my study of the ego and of the human experience as a flow of thoughts in the collective consciousness. Spiritual thinker and writer Jeff Foster likens thoughts to waves in an ever swirling ocean (51-52). Mary Baker Eddy writes poetically, "Mortal thoughts chase one another like snowflakes, and drift to the ground" (*S&H* 250). Hence my continuing dedication to the practice of awareness, presence—a constant soft attention to the thoughts that present themselves and an ability if not to "control" them then at least to choose how I respond to them.

I so admire the fantastic poise of those performers who work under incredible pressure, facing countless critics judging intensely every aspect of their work. The great ones express a presence of mind—not of arrogance, but of peaceful confidence, clear focus, single-minded purpose, vocal and physical freedom and intensity. The results of their collective efforts are so many unforgettably powerful and moving productions. I hunger to take part in similarly effective productions, and so growing in these areas is of supreme importance to my performance practice.

Vocal sound is produced by a coordination between three systems—respiration (breath), phonation (the sound emitted when breath passes through partially closed vocal folds), and articulation (the movements and interactions of the articulators—lips, teeth and tongue—to form words). Every muscle involved in every aspect of the vocal process is moving (or not moving) in response to a constant parade of thoughts: again, be those thoughts conscious or subconscious, be they primary (primal, organic, spontaneous) or secondary (conditioned, manipulated, externally controlled) impulses.

From early in my vocal training, I was made aware of the ways singers (and actors) manipulate their sound in myriad ways, often resulting in less than optimal function. In other words, due to a lack of healthy coordination among the three systems, tensions and imbalances arise, resulting in some degree of vocal constriction. The effects of this constriction can include a harsh or unpleasant sound, an inconsistent quality throughout the range, a lack of clarity in the tone or pronunciation of the words, a lack of resonance and volume, or any number of other vocal issues.

So, since the voice is a result of a delicate interaction of muscular systems, and since these systems are all directly and minutely affected by thought, again, it matters a great deal what someone thinks. Moreover, since a singer or actor is themselves the very instrument being played upon, the fact that humans almost by definition have thoughts creates a situation unique to vocal sound making. No other instrument has an intelligence to act upon itself. Moreover, the fact that humans generally think a great deal *about* themselves further complicates vocal function: the instrument may have a thought about itself, which in that very instant affects its own function for better or worse. Learning how best to think and what to think about become the central concerns of anyone's "technique."

My artistic journey has been a long arc of examining my practice—strengths and weaknesses, purpose and potential—through this lens. Freeing my voice (and body) for fuller, more powerful, more deeply connected, responsive, spontaneous, and, I hope, ultimately, moving performances involves looking thoughtfully at my habits—good and bad—and, consequently, at the thoughts that engender them. How I think about myself and how I see myself in relation to others and the world has such a direct impact on my work that every small discovery in this area fascinates me and can lead me into new areas of inquiry. For example, learning via the Enneagram that a strong desire for external approval is very typical of type Threes now helps me understand why I would shut down (constrict) the lower area of my range as a subconscious reaction to feeling

that opening up this part of my voice/self might be interpreted as either impolite or hostile, resulting in a negative response from others. This expansion of my self knowledge has made a world of difference to my singing and to my teaching.

As a direct result of my engagement with the writings of Cicely Berry, Kristin Linklater, Patsy Rodenburg, and others, I've been discovering more specifically how the physical tensions (or otherwise less than optimal functionings) that have limited the use of my voice stem from a limited self-concept. Likewise, as a collaborative artist, I inevitably have thoughts about my colleagues and members of my audience. Noticing what these thoughts are and how I process them is also a vital part of the ongoing refinement of my practice. Through the spiritual thinkers I am studying and my own contemplative practices, I am obtaining useful perspectives on the egoic thought machine that is the human condition. Gaining some freedom over unproductive thoughts and consequently over the physical systems these thoughts act upon, has resulted in more vocal freedom and, I feel, in more effective performances. The celebration of progress in all of these areas is hugely significant to me and goes far beyond technique, although it is an integral part of it.

As a teacher, I have many occasions to give my students guidance about these very issues. They all have thoughts, too. My being able to share with them the ways I've learned to think about things for maximum freedom is a valuable part of how I am able to help them. For example, a student of mine was auditioning for a role she very much wanted. She was concerned about nerves during the audition. We talked about different mental approaches she could take that would move her out of the vulnerable sense of asking for approval or hoping to be given a job into viewing the audition process as an opportunity to touch the lives of the listeners, without a need for anything in return. She could immediately sense the change of state these new thoughts produced, and her singing became clearer, lighter, stronger and altogether more beautiful and moving. Incidentally, she got that role.

The personal adjustments and inner expansion I am experiencing cannot help but lead to a wider scope for my work in the world. Many of my biggest career highlights were the result of being “ready” when unexpected opportunities arose. Much of my current focus on personal and spiritual growth is getting myself ready for the opportunities I know will come by preparing my instrument, mind and heart for them.

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