

"Posture and Breath" - by Gilles Denizot

Il canto è fiato (singing is breath) used to say the Italian Masters of the Bel Canto. The vocal training they provided students with was based on this fundamental principle. The optimal breath management, achieved by adopting a specific posture called *postura nobile* (noble posture), is the essence of a healthy vocalism. What is this ideal posture and how can one master breathing?

The Postura Nobile or Noble Posture

The singularity of the singer's instrument is that it is contained in his body but in addition it IS his body. A musician uses an exterior instrument and his body. It is true that a musician is dependant upon the quality of the piano or the violin he plays, but also upon the muscular response of certain areas of his body that he can easily observe. This difference is crucial. The singer does not see his larynx, his vocal folds and his diaphragm. He often is not able to locate them or explain the way they function. This causes all sorts of wrong ideas, or at least imprecise ones. The piano teacher adjusts the stool for his student so that his arm is on the correct axis in front of the keyboard. The voice teacher must also adjust the external posture of his student, but he is unable to directly act upon the vocal folds or the diaphragm. He may only work from the outside so as to ensure himself that the student's posture allows the best disposition of the vocal instrument. This specificity is the reason for the problems we all encounter in the study of singing.

The Bel Canto Masters taught the *postura nobile* or noble posture. The adjective is interesting. One does not say *athletic, muscular or natural*. One simply speaks about the nobility it evokes. This shall be our first statement. The singer's posture cannot be *natural* because it is *elaborated*. However it is far simpler than people say and it must allow the maximal use of everyone's physical capacities. Not long ago teachers took great care in evaluating the instrument of any student who wanted to learn singing: the rib cage, the structure of the face. Jessye Norman rightly said that she had indeed learned to master her breath but that she also could only be grateful for the particular and innate dispositions of her body: the shape of her oral cavity and of her throat, the height of her soft palate, the nature of her larynx and of her vocal folds (ARTE 2005). We all have physical specificities that are more or less adapted to a given use. There is nothing we can do about it. But a professional singer has the duty to exploit his/her natural dispositions to his/her best.

The thorax of a boy is narrow and flat, then it develops itself in a forward direction during his growth. The rib cage becomes wider; this allows for a larger intake of breath. Additionally the boy's larynx *drops* down when his voice breaks and the tessitura lowers by an octave, unlike girls who stay on the upper octave. A significant aspect of a child's education is to be taught to *stand up straight*. As a result a *social* posture is achieved. This posture becomes *usual* (rather than natural) and is even increased when we speak in public. The *noble posture* of the singer is an amplified *social* posture, and specifically structured so that the body and the vocal organs are fully functional. Feet are steady on the ground, knees slightly bent, the curve of the back is corrected, the pelvis is flexible as well as the abdominal muscles, the torso is open (umbrella-shape), the sternum is high and forward, the shoulders are down, the skull is resting on the neck, in a vertical alignment. When a singer adopts the *noble posture* one can observe that the sternum is high and forward and that the rib cage is wide. Female singers (more often than their male colleagues) are almost systematically looking to maintain their rib cage open. The unfortunate frequent mistake is to open the rib cage by working on muscles. It implies forcing to open and to maintain the posture of the torso. This effort causes inopportune tensions whilst singing. It is far simpler, effective and healthy to first open the rib cage by adopting a definite *bone* posture, before breathing

in. The *postura nobile* allows this. Your rib cage is open without any muscular effort. Your lungs may expand without forcing within the space provided. This inspiration is faster and more complete since the lungs are free to inflate. Teaching a flat torso and a depressed sternum evidently proves that the instructor does not know human physiology. It has been proven (using a succession of X-ray studies) that when the sternum is low, the diaphragm is high and so is the larynx. A collapsed torso always causes almost insurmountable difficulties, particularly modifying the voice to the extent that one might be mistaken about the singer's vocal category. The *postura nobile* is neither natural, nor soft, but energetic and flexible. This posture is essential to sing at one's best and, for some, to reach professional level.

Breathing mechanism

How does breath enter the lungs? The diaphragm does not contract and lower itself because breath enters the lungs; it is precisely the opposite. Let's use the image of the syringe held upright (needle at the top). How do you fill it with air? Evidently you have to draw the plunger out as you cannot push air inside the syringe. In order to lower the diaphragm, you must adopt the noble posture and free some space normally occupied by the internal abdominal organs. When the abdominal muscles are strengthened instead of being supple, the diaphragm is facing a strong resistance at inspiration. It has been established that a neurological connection exists between the diaphragm and the larynx. When the former drops, so does the latter. Clearly the contraction of the abdominal wall has its value in phonation, but when breathing in, one must relax the abdominal wall and the four intercostals muscles.

How does breath exit the lungs? There is a difference in pressure between the breath inside the lungs and the outside air. Let's use the image of an inflated balloon held between two fingers. When you release your fingers, the balloon instantly deflates. It is pointless to press on the balloon in order to release the air or, in the case of singing, to voluntarily tighten the abdominal wall on the onset of sound. When the abdominal muscles are violently squeezed at the beginning of phonation or during singing, breath rushes too rapidly through the larynx or in too large a quantity. This causes a leakage of breath and of sound, or a rigid sound. In addition vocal folds are assailed and the duration of the phrase is shortened. One speaks of *glottic shock* which has nothing to do with Garcia's *coup de glotte*. When standing in the *noble posture*, as the lungs are emptied, it is easy to renew the whole cycle from the beginning by releasing the abdominal wall and by allowing another full contraction of the diaphragm. This breathing in does not imply collapsing the upper torso posture. Luciano Pavarotti explains that *the great secret is to have the patience to let diaphragm go down again before beginning the next phrase* (Hines, *Great Singers on Great Singing*, p.221). By respecting this advice one makes sure that the larynx is stabilized once again in a lower posture.

Your singing voice, just like your speaking voice in fact, is voiced breath. If your sound is hard or weak, if your sound is uneven and shaky as if produced by nervous or muscular spasms, if your throat (which relaxed at inspiration) squeezes, then you have not been able to balance the whole process. You must educate the antagonistic forces of the diaphragm and the abdominals so that they may work in coordination and that their respective strengths are balanced. Let us state categorically that no optimal sound can be achieved without proper balance of this mechanism. The situation is worsened by various vocal troubles. Some people attempt to solve these difficulties with exercises to raise and stretch the velum, place the tongue forward and the jaw backward, lower the larynx and open the pharynx. Based on our experience as singer and voice teacher, we affirm that it is preferable to work on the posture and the breath. It is anyway the method used by all good specialists in phoniatics. The singer's instrument IS his body, just like the singer's voice IS his breath: *il canto è fiato*.

In vocal training one must accomplish the *postura nobile* and the action of the *appoggio* which is the coordination of the breath management. Then train this by using vocalises in the middle register prior to exploring the extremes of the voice. When posture and breath are definite and mastered, the larynx and the

pharynx may then properly function. One avoids, with this antique method, numerous vocal troubles which in turn cause so many difficulties and doubts amongst singers.

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Articles

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