



Applying Chiaroscuro to Your Art and Your Life

Singers and teachers who understand chiaroscuro and who know how to produce this kind of a tone in themselves and in their students are very rare. Here, a noted voice teacher explains the balance of bright and dark singing, applying it to other aspects of life as well.

by Neil Semer

The word describing the tonal ideal of Italian Bel Canto is chiaroscuro. Translated from the dictionary, this means dark-clear. Often it is described as the “dark bright” tone. The often-assumed meaning is a balance of head and chest resonance. This implies the well-balanced coordination of the thyro-arytenoid muscle (the muscle in the vocal folds which by its contraction creates more chest voice in the tone) and the cryco-thyroid muscle (which by its contraction lengthens and thins the vocal folds, creating more head voice).

Understanding chiaroscuro in its fullest aspect is of vital importance to all singers.

In Eastern philosophy, the term yin-yang means a balance of opposing forces. In physics, there is the law of conservation of energy, which says that for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. These ideas have far reaching importance for singers. Many singers’ attempts at vocal mastery are based on local controls being employed. (For example, commands to the self, such as “Stand up straight! Relax your tongue and jaw! Breathe calmly and low!”) This means you look upon your body as something you will should dominate. You believe dominating your body will help you gain the desired vocal control. Frustratingly, this usage of will tends to create only tension and blockage of movement towards your goal.

The great Italian voice teacher from the 19th Century, G.B. Lamperti (in the book *Vocal Wisdom*) is quoted as saying that singers need to begin with objective learning (mastery of their instrument on the physical plain), later surrendering their singing to subjective learning (mastery of the imagination, which coordinates the physical body to incarnate its artistic vision). This self-balancing aspect will help you achieve your goal, rather than getting caught in the lopsided energy created by the commands previously mentioned.

For example, if you are wandering around the stage in an audition, the auditioner might fairly give you feedback that you were ungrounded and need to stand still. To make helpful use of this information, you would want to feel the contact between the floor and your feet, the release of your knees and the float of the pelvis under you (all grounding, stabilizing, “earth directed” energies). This balances with the floating upward of the spine and head (releasing, gravity escaping “heavenly or spiritual” energies). If you simply took the auditioner’s advice of “Stand still!” you would probably tighten and feel trapped and uncomfortable.

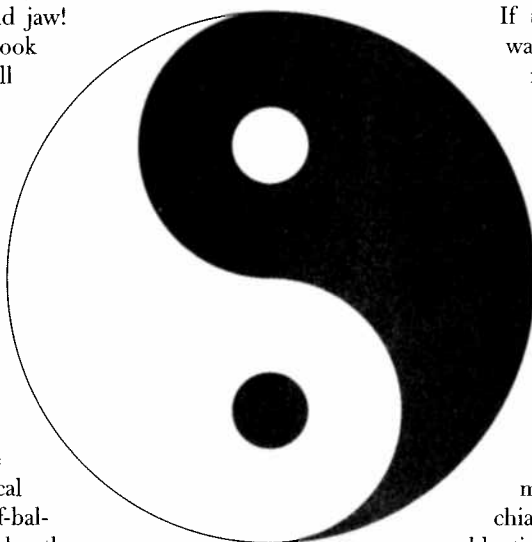
Many singers have insufficient brilliance and clarity in their tone, singing in a way that is often described as “too far back.” The attempt to

fix this problem by “singing forward” or “placing it in the mask” is often prescribed. Sadly, due to its “this, rather than that” approach, this is an invitation to rigidity in the delicate internal musculature of the larynx, which must be free to make minute adjustments of tension and release with every split-second change of pitch, volume and expression. Rather than holding a “placement” in the attempt to feel vibration in the bones of the face, sensations in the mask are a result of balanced phonation. Seeing the problem in chiaroscuro terms, clarity of tone (which comes from clarity of speech), must balance with its opposite, openness (which comes from the length, shape and looseness of the vocal tract, otherwise called “open throat”). If the singer is “too dark,” trueness of vowels and brilliance of consonants probably need addressing. By doing so, the higher resonances (called by scientists the “singer’s formant”) will be strengthened. This is the ring that allows a classical voice to ride over an orchestra without the help of amplification.

If the voice sounds clear but shrill, lacking warmth, or “over-bright,” the throat opening needs to be addressed. By raising the palate, widening the back wall of the throat, relaxing the tongue and jaw and having the lips loosely puckered, the larynx finds a relaxed, lowered posture that adds strength to the fundamental pitch and strengthens the lower formants that create tonal warmth.

Balancing of the breathing mechanism is essential for a fine singer. What we call support is scientifically defined as the balance of “flow and force,” specifically, the rate and pressure with which air flows through the vocal folds. Developing an optimal balance of those two principals is chiaroscuro in action. Lamperti speaks innumerable times of the need for “pelvic control of the breath.” The air is in the lungs, (which are in the thorax),

but the control of the air lies below, in the pelvis. It is my contention that through gentle contraction, the pelvic floor is the part of the body best used to initiate the flow of air on which we sing. I once heard Birgit Nilsson say in a masterclass, “Breathe so low that you can’t talk about it in public.” The meaning seems pretty clear. The flexible lean outward of muscles in the epigastrium (top of the solar plexus) and lower back helps secure the lower position of the diaphragm, which along with the correct closure of the vocal folds regulates breath pressure (degree of force). Therefore, the opposing action of pelvic floor and diaphragm create this balance. Just bringing your belly in or out (depending on the various schools of thought on this important issue) will keep you out of balance.



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Here are some other important chiaroscuro ideas for singers:

- Balance emotion with thought. Emotion alone is stormy and destructive. Intellect alone is cold. Lamperti recommends a 50-50 balance of emotion and intellect.

- Balance fine musicianship with spontaneity: Slavish attention to correctness alone will make your music boring. Spontaneity without form may make you exciting, but sloppy and vulgar. Be a fine, faithful-to-the-page musician, but risk bringing something that is uniquely you to your music making.

- Balance self-confidence with humility: Self-confidence is a great and necessary quality for a singer. But if self-confidence is unchecked, you'll not be able to hear valuable advice on what you could be doing better. At the same time, if you are only self-effacing, you probably won't have the confidence or hunger to see yourself through the rough times of a career. I once heard Pavarotti say, "I'm my own fiercest critic, but I never forget that I'm Pavarotti." This seems an ideal balance of high self-esteem and having the ability to see oneself with clarity—warts and all.

- Seek the balance that chiaroscuro implies in your art and life. It's an energy and focus that will liberate and enlighten you.

Neil Semer teaches Lamperti-based vocal technique in New York. He also teaches regularly in Toronto, London, Paris, Berlin, Dresden, Frankfurt, and Cologne. For the last eight years, he has led the annual Neil Semer Summer Vocal Institute in Germany. His students sing leading roles in opera houses around the world. You can visit his website at: www.neilsemmer.com. He welcomes correspondence at neilsemmer@aol.com



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