



Are You a Plan A or Plan B Singer?

One of the favorite teachers at the Classical Singer Convention, Neil Semer here helps singers reach beyond the ordinary.

by Neil Semer

Do you look for the secure choice before you commit to the inspired choice? Are you hyperaware of how you're singing, (or how you *think* you're singing) instead of focusing on how you want to be singing? Are you trying to prove to your listeners (or even to yourself) that you're good enough? Are you singing the piece you're singing only to show off the high note, or taking that long phrase in one breath, instead of making a compelling musical and dramatic event throughout? When fearful or insecure, are you more likely to grab on for "dear life" than spread your wings and risk flying?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, you might be a Plan B singer.

Plan B singers are more involved with warding off catastrophe than they are with creating beauty. Do you sacrifice the thrill—the emotional, musical or dramatic truth and spontaneity—for a narrowly conceived idea of security? Realistically, the high-wire world of great classical singing requires excitement and deep personal investment. Mere appropriateness is simply too boring to compete on a high level.

There is a simple maxim I believe all high-quality singers must take to heart: "The *worst* Plan A is better than the *best* Plan B." Plan A singers look for what is vivid, exciting, heartfelt, spontaneous, or soulful, *no matter how fully you are or are not able to accomplish your goal*. Plan B singers look for what is safe and appropriate, and designed not to offend.

It is important to consider what safety in this profession is, and what it is not. When your goal is to "not screw up" or "not to crack on that high note," you will likely rigidify your alignment, breathing, and/or laryngeal musculature to accomplish that goal. At best, this "grab" gives you a momentary relief from your terror. It's imperative to know that the sense of control you received from that grab is an illusion of control—not real control at all. Real control comes from an excellent overall concept of your musical goal.

This is the truth behind all fine vocal tech-



nique. A beautiful, true musical impulse will lead you to better, more whole-bodied technique (thus better "control") than fear-based commands to the self ("I better hold onto that note," "What if I screw up?" etc.). Fear-based commands inevitably lead you to local grabs, which condemn you to an ever-greater struggle with your instrument, and an unmusical, note-by-note way of singing.

But shouldn't my technique make me feel secure?

There is nothing in life that is sure, except death and taxes. Once you accept that, you can find true freedom. Technique is a path, a way. As mere mortals, we understandably want certainty, but truly fine technique will only teach you how the "knee bone is connected to the thigh bone," vocally speaking. That means mastering the skills of how to align your body, how to breathe, open the throat and resonators, speak clearly, and deal with the *passaggio*, among other skills. It is then up to your musical, poetic, dramatic imagination to organize those skills into an artistic event.

Lamperti, the great 19th century voice teacher who forms the core philosophy of my teaching, said that beginning singers must work objectively at first (mastering individual physical skills such as the ones just mentioned). As you advance, you must switch to subjective thinking. This means imagining the given musical event from the sense of the

whole event, not from individual commands to individual body parts.

If you are still working locally, you are not ready to sing publicly. Your audience (or auditioners) don't care about your tongue position, your notions of breath control or the occasional vocal imperfection. Are you an interesting singer and performer? Do you have something unique and ear/eye grabbing to say? The moment you settle for Plan B, the answer is generally a disappointing "no." How many times have you heard a momentary mistake in an otherwise thrilling performance,

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and forgotten it in an instant (the Plan A singer)? How many times have you been bored to death by people being merely appropriate (the plan B singer)?

Technique must be honed continually, but always with the goal of greater vocal freedom and musical/dramatic imagination in mind. Many singers are slaves to their technique, forgetting that technique is there to serve you and your musical impulses.

Singers must practice local controls until they become automatic. Only then can those controls be artistically employed. Then commit to your musical ideas, and let them "sing you." If you are thinking of mechanics as you perform, you are not truly in the music. Good technique should feel like it is being drawn

from you by your inspired musicality, not something you do so you can be "allowed" to make music.

Some of these "local controls" singers should master (preferably outside of singing) include:

- Good alignment. Good alignment should be freeing, not a rigid cage.
- Good breathing technique. Good breathing is low in the body, and specific in its feeling. Everyone knows that you should breathe low, but how to do it is the real question. Once you are clear about how, have you then automatized it with clearly targeted gymnastics?
- Open throat. The opening of the throat needs to be present, whether you are silent or singing. Otherwise, the singer is always going in and out of readiness to sing. Many singers are collapsed in their throat opening and/or alignment during inhalation and between phrases. The lift of the palate, width of the throat wall, and release of the tongue, jaw and lips must be so practiced that the desire to sing immediately brings

you into this state of readiness.

- Clear speech. Speech should be clear in your middle voice. Lamperti said: "If clarity of speech and beauty of tone are at odds with one another, you are on the wrong road." It is true that vowels need to modify the open throat and consonants cannot be said with great clarity above the 2nd passaggio or your throat will constrict. In the middle voice, however, there is no reason good diction should compromise your tone.
- Passaggio. Though some consider this topic controversial, most great practitioners of Bel Canto have learned a clear and systemic way to deal with singing in and traveling through the passaggio. It is generally accepted that the feeling of the vowel in this region is more slender than in the middle voice, allowing the voice to blossom open once it is above the passaggio. The second passaggio is the more difficult one for men, and often the first one (between the chest register and the middle register) is more problematic for women.

Being piecemeal in your thinking, and attempting to control the result, is Plan B. Concerning yourself with the response of your public or auditioners while you are singing is Plan B. Being specific and clear about your wholly imagined musical event, and trusting yourself to release it to the world, is Plan A.

Take a risk and try it. *Think of what you're risking by not taking this risk!* When you look at it this way, trusting and releasing yourself to your creativity is logical and obvious rather than scary, and infinitely preferable.

Neil Semer will conduct his 8th Annual Neil Semer Vocal Institute in Germany in August. His main private voice studio is in New York City, though he regularly teaches in Toronto, London, Paris, Berlin, Dresden, Frankfurt and Cologne as well. Information is available on his website at www.neilsemmer.com and he welcomes email correspondence at neilsemmer@aol.com



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