

## 6. NEIL SEMER

*Neil had just done a brilliant workshop for my students and we were off to LA to see La Bohème. He was on the West Coast for speaking engagements and had students doing major roles in the opera. It was great to see him, and would there be time for an interview? Probably not, so we'd do it by phone.*

*Neil Semer was a major presenter at the first National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS) Conference on Belting, in Miami, January of 2000, and the physicality of his approach fascinated me. It seemed so directly related to theatre voice. I've since observed his work with singers from many parts of the world, and in the year following the conference, had the good fortune to study with him briefly in New York.*

*Neil Semer is a master teacher of voice and gives workshops internationally on the subject of vocal technique and performance practice. His main studio is in New York, and he teaches regularly in Toronto, London, Paris, and throughout Germany. The Neil Semer Summer Vocal Institutes, in Coesfeld and Aub, Germany, are in their eleventh season (2007) and attract participants from major international opera houses, as well as from musical theatre. His teaching combines "the old Italian School of Bel Canto, as expounded by Giovanni Battista Lamperti, with scientific understanding of vocal function" (N. Semer, July 9, 2004).*



*Photography by James Luisi*

## PERSPECTIVE

*Will you say something about your background and about what influenced or informed your approach to teaching?*

I had a very varied background when I was young. I did “one of everything,” which at the time, was a very unfocused kind of performing career. Funnily enough, it turned out to be a very good background for a teaching career. I did classical music, theatre music, pop music, mime, classical theatre, comic theatre, improvisational comedy, among other things. So I got a very broad view of theatre and music and that served me well as I began to teach. I could really understand the different needs of varying kinds of performers. My first real influence of teaching was the book *Vocal Wisdom*, by Giovanni Battista Lamperti. It’s a book about the philosophy of singing, to which I then supplemented current understanding of vocal science.

*Do you work with students on classical as well as musical theatre repertoire?*

Yes, I do, but there’s one thing I’d like to say in reference to that question, and that is: I do not teach classical music to non-classical singers. I look for singers to sing from their passion, their own personal sort of musicality, what they are expressive with. I will work on classical repertoire with a classical singer, because that’s what they love, and that’s what they have a feel for and the direction they want to go. I do not believe in teaching an Italian art song to a person who will never sing in Italian, who has lousy Italian, and who doesn’t relate to Italian vocal style. He or she might relate to singing with a really healthy sense of line that one might find in a Rodgers and Hart song, or even a pop tune. I’m looking for people to engage their artistry at the earliest possible moment, and to do that, I think people have to sing music they relate to.

*I’m glad you added that, because it’s a really interesting perspective. How would you describe the vocal requirements for singers in musical theatre today? How have those requirements changed over the years and where do you think they’re going?*

Musical theatre is much harder on voices now than it ever used to be. In the old classic musical, forty to eighty years ago, each singer had less to sing.

Leading role singers would sing three or four, at the very most, five songs in a show. Now, some of the musicals that are written, *Miss Saigon*, for instance, are through composed. Therefore, people sing much more in an evening, and sometimes it's music that is much harder on the voice. They are aided with microphones, so if they have good microphone technique and don't push their voices, they can survive it pretty well. However, there is no escaping that people tend to sing more and harder music than was written in prior decades.

*It's not going to let up, is it?*

I don't think it will get any easier anytime soon, no.

*What role does voice science, or vocal anatomy and physiology, play in your work?*

It plays a very important role. I think it is any voice teacher's first job, to help make the student aware of the physical nature of the instrument. That's just the beginning of what a good technique is, because it is ultimately more personal than that. But I do believe that all teachers should have a good knowledge of the anatomy of the human body as a whole, vocal anatomy, and acoustics. We need to understand it and be able to communicate it in simple terms to our students.

*Does movement or movement-based training (e.g., the Alexander Technique, yoga, Feldenkrais, Pilates) play a role in your teaching?*

Certainly Alexander Technique does. The others less so. Pilates is obviously wonderful, but I think it can be a little rigid for singers. Yoga is wonderfully releasing, stretching, and centering, but not specific enough to the act of singing.

## THE TRAINING

*Where do you start? What are the foundational aspects of training to which you regularly attend?*

First, I start on alignment. There's no point in going to other things if good alignment isn't there. Second, I teach what it is to open the vocal tract. Third, I go to breathing. Then I start to deal with connected phonation.

I may use lip trills to start to get the breath moving and coordinate it with vocal utterance. Then I work to develop the musical idea of *line*, of the spinning line I should say, along with the balance of the heavy and light mechanism (thyroarytenoid and cricothyroid muscles). I then do that on vowels. I work on getting the articulation of consonants as agile and as far forward on the tongue tip and lips as possible. In Italian, one says, “*I consonanti sono i fiori dei labbri*,” which means “The consonants are the flowers of the lips.” So when one experiences the consonants very far forward on the tongue tip and lips, we get the voice, as some people call it, well (or forwardly) placed. I always balance that with a deep position of the larynx and a connected sense of tracheal resonance.

*If you are teaching a musical theatre singer, would that be different, for example, from a classical position of the throat?*

I don't teach different positions of the throat. I apply what I've already discussed to different repertoire, depending upon the singer I'm working with. But I know there are some musical theatre teachers who teach positioning this way or that way. I am looking for openness, connectedness, and musical and dramatic truth. Style, I believe, is best left to the individuality of the artist. I believe it is my job to work on fundamentals, which allow individual artists to fly on the wings of their own creativity. I teach an open, released larynx, no matter what style I am working with.

*What do you expect to observe in a singer who is well trained or in a performer who sings well, with or without training?*

I expect to see ease. I expect to feel comfortable that that person can get through the performance and preferably eight performances a week. Ease, connectedness, simple truthfulness, boldness, and spontaneity are all important to me.

*Granted, the journey is different from one singer to another, but if you think it appropriate, would you cite a couple of examples of how students might get from A to B, or from their first lessons with you to a solid professional technique?*

I give students what is the singing equivalent of a ballet barre. I'm looking for certain physical responses to get automatized, so that singers can be

truly in their artistry, in their feeling mode when they're performing. To do that, I give them exercises to automatize alignment, openness in the throat, low breathing, and speech that is clear and agile without tension in the articulators. I will work on their alignment, and just show them exactly how to do it *outside* of singing. I will show them how to open their throat and do it as an athletic act outside of singing. I give them a lot of nonsinging exercises, so that in the moment of phonation, the body is already trained to respond in a particular way. So I will work on breathing as breathing. I will work on speaking as speaking, opening as opening, lengthening of the spine as lengthening of the spine, so that when we go into the artistic act of singing a phrase, those things are in some way already starting to function without thought or local (read: piecemeal and uncoordinated) control.

*So the singer is able to work beyond those mechanical things that are already in place.*

I seek the whole artistic act, rather than a particular technical point when one sings. Gymnastics to develop the various sorts of local control already mentioned should be done away from singing as much as possible.

*In the answers to earlier questions, you have certainly touched on some, if not all, of the six aspects of training listed below:*

*Alignment, Breathing, Range, Resonance, Articulation,  
Connection (the Acting Dimension)*

*Now, from the perspective of your own approach, would you comment specifically on each of these technical elements, to whatever extent and in whatever order you choose?*

I start with *alignment*. There are basically three energies in the body. The first is groundedness. So I'm looking for people to feel the floor under their feet, release in their knees, and the pelvis releasing under them. I call those elements that tie us to the earth grounding energy. The second energy I'm looking for is the floating upward sort. One could say, on the metaphysical plane, that it's a spiritual dimension. The spine, the neck and head seem to release, floating upward. The third energy is the energy of the

heart. At the level of the sternum, there's a feeling of openness and forward movement, which is metaphysically the opening of the heart to one's public. So I like to look to both Eastern and Western knowledge and philosophy. Then one finds a clear sense of both the physical and the metaphysical. As I said, I then work on openness. I would define the openness of the pharynx as the feeling of the smile (which raises the zygomatic arch and the soft palate), the feeling that one has before one yawns (which widens the pharynx), a released puckering forward of the lips (to help lengthen the vocal tract), and a releasing of the tongue root forward. I like to work with a fairly closed mouth in the mid range to help find the inner space. Many students seem to favor having an open mouth without actually opening the pharynx. I am looking for a long vocal tract. That requires a lowered larynx and a puckering forward of the lips. This longer vocal tract creates connectedness.

I don't address *range*. I don't try to stretch the instrument. I look first to develop a solid, connected, well-balanced middle and low range. I see that as the building block for the high voice. When the middle and lower registers function in a relaxed, well-oiled way, then I do a lot of work on the *passaggio* (the break between the middle and high registers). I believe in the two-pyramid theory of the *passaggio*. The *passaggio* is the place where the tips of both pyramids meet. I look for a very slender production there that I effect through closed vowels (specifically a closed /u/ or a closed /i/) that I use with closed, puckered lips. Then one lengthens the opening of the throat and mouth in an upward direction above the *passaggio* into the top. I attempt this only when the student has a functioning middle voice.

### *Resonance?*

A balance of head and chest. I'm looking to get a release from the chest and make use of tracheal resonance, by openness and a release of the tongue, and a feeling of speaking from the level of the heart, speaking from the sternum. That is not pushing *into* the sternum; it is a release *from* it that comes from a very open throat, a released tongue, and a feeling that you are speaking in an intimate voice, rather than speaking to project. It's the way many film actors talk. They speak in a very intimate way because they know the boom mike is there. I'm looking for people to speak in that

personal, connected way. From that connectedness, one then creates greater clarity of the speech, raises subglottal pressure, and the voice will begin to project, so it is then “intimate for thousands.” That’s what I am looking for in terms of sound: an intimate core that is then projected through the greater subglottal pressure of the person singing.

*That’s an interesting perspective and a visual that you’ve made extraordinarily clear. Now, articulation.*

I work a lot on tongue tip and tongue root release, and I do that using the dental consonants without any “helping” movement of the jaw. With /l/, /t/, /d/, or /n/, I do exercises to get the tongue tip to raise and lower without the jaw helping. I also will work on the rest of the consonants with a thumb between the fingers. Not a cork, by the way, because with a cork you bite to hold it in place. I’m looking for the jaw to be completely relaxed and not bite, so I prefer people to use their thumb. If they bite their thumb, they’ll know it by the pain (or at least the teeth marks) it creates. The singer learns to keep the jaw in a position of softness and rest, and articulate with a very agile tongue tip and lips. I’m looking for the lips to not pull back, because that shortens the vocal tract and raises the larynx. I work on articulation of all consonants for an agile tongue tip and released lips, tongue root, and jaw.

*And finally, connection, or the acting dimension.*

Well, I work on that a great deal. Certainly, there is no point in a person going out for an audition with that not being in place. I work from the approach of challenging and inspiring people’s storytelling and specific acting choices, but I also simply help people by doing monologue work. First I’ll take the text outside of the music and have the singer speak intimately from that connection on the sternum. The artist gets a sense of connection to breath and text with that. Then I challenge singers to be very specific and bold about their storytelling.

*So you would have a student do a song or an aria as a spoken monologue first?*

Generally, yes.

*Again, from your perspective, how do these individual aspects of training relate to one another (1) in the learning process and (2) in performance?*

Lamperti said something very important. He said that when you're a student, you employ objective learning and that is from the feet up. When you're a professional, you employ subjective learning and that is from the head down. I believe what he means by *objective learning* are the skills one needs, such as alignment, breathing, opening, clarity of speech, how to navigate the *passaggio* (the "break"), which you really do need to learn and practice with tremendous repetition in the way that dancers do their daily barre to automatize certain physical responses. However, when you perform, you perform from an artistic idea of the whole, how you're going to sound, how you're going to feel, the story you have to tell, the atmosphere you wish to create. So you're going to work with much more generalized principles that organize the many individual things that you have already automatized under one umbrella. You cannot be thinking about the individual pieces of your technique in a performance and expect to connect to your public.

*Brilliant. Do you have any additional comments you'd like to make?*

No. I really look forward to reading the book when it comes out.

## PUBLICATIONS

Neil Semer, "Applying Chiaroscuro to Your Art and Life," *Classical Singer Magazine*, Volume 16, number 10. October 2003, 30.

———. "Musical Theatre Singing for the Classical Singer," *Classical Singer Magazine*, Volume 17, number 1. January 2004, 14.

———. "Are You a Plan A or Plan B Singer?" *Classical Singer Magazine*, Volume 17, number 8. August 2004, 41.

## REFERENCE

Lamperti, G. B. 1931. *Vocal Wisdom*. Edited by W. E. Brown. Marlboro, NJ: Taplinger.