

The Three Word Diet



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Diet—what an unpleasant word! The associations with it tend to be that of denial of the pleasurable, sensuous experience of food and drink. However, in my twenty five or more years of teaching singing I have found a teaching tool I call the *three word diet*, that actually puts professional singers and aspiring singers more, rather than less, in contact with their sensuous selves.

As a singer's technician, I believe it is my job to acquaint students with a large body of physical information meant to illuminate and optimize the processes of the body in creating beautiful, healthy, efficient and expressive song.

It is normal in our world to have unresolved control issues and to presume that it is through clear analytical thinking and judgment that we will solve all of our problems and gain control over our environment. Unfortunately, however, true control is often counter-intuitive. For example, it is the counter-intuitive, scary act of putting one's weight on the downhill part of a ski (making one immediately accelerate) that gives one control while skiing. It is the counter-intuitive act of trusting the buoyancy of water by flipping onto one's back that is the beginning of real control while

swimming. It is the counter-intuitive act of surrendering to the realities of the present moment that allows us to chart a clear course to where we wish to go in our lives. And giving over to increased breath flow (for the hyper-adductor) or intensifying sub-glottic pressure (for the hypo-adductor) is almost always counter-intuitive. If it were not, the singer would be doing it already.

I often tell new students that I proudly teach *singing for dumb people*. What I mean, humor aside, is that singing, when done at an elite level, is an extremely sensuous activity, involving fine motor coordination and an acutely attuned ear. Intellect can play only a supporting role. Those people who are strongly identified with their intellect and have loud, judgmental chatter obliterating their proprioception are at a distinct disadvantage when learning to sing. This is where the *three word diet* comes in.

I pose the question, "How does that feel?" dozens of times in a lesson. Often I am met with a response that goes something like "Well, it's not as good as it could be," or "When I hit the high note, I felt something tighten," or "It sounds weird," or "I need to get more slender in the passaggio." The singer is completely unaware that he or she has failed to hear or respond to the actual question. I then say again, "But how did it *feel*?" If I am met with an intensification of the need to judge, condemn, praise, figure out what is perceived to be the problem or the creation of a plan of attack for the next exercise with ever longer verbiage, I will put that artist on the *three word diet*. I'm ruthless on this, since it is my sad experience that when it comes to singing matters, the more people talk, the less they say—so ruthless that, truth be told, the singer is really on a *one word diet*, as it is I who provide the first two words. They are, "I felt..." and the singer is allowed to add only one word. It still surprises me how often people who have just said paragraphs diagnosing their own problems or judging their actions are unable to say one simple word that accurately describes a piece of their experience from seconds ago.

I prompt with words describing physical experience such as: pleasurable? uncomfortable? tight? loose? vibrant? released? whole? disconnected? spacious? high? low? tiring? energized? If any of these words prompts a response of, "Yes," I may further inquire, "Where?" so that the perception of the experience is deepened. I also prompt with words such as: fun? sad? painful? silly? enraged? anxious? emotional? However, these words are only provided as an initial guide to developing a vocabulary of sensuous and emotional words with which to identify experiences. The singer is strongly encouraged to develop her or his own ever-lengthening list.

I may also recommend spiritual reading (non-religious) to students, as the need for mental control frequently has

its deepest roots in the great spiritual issues that confront us all, such as mortality and abandonment anxiety. Held breath and tight musculature are often cues to spiritual and emotional issues that need to be gently, sensitively addressed. Another indication of the need for this sort of work may be that a gifted student does something well quickly, and thereafter does it less well or not at all. While the skill was a *circus trick* it was quickly mastered; then it began to take on emotional meaning, triggering fears buried in the unconscious. Where there was previously ease, there is now tension and lack of intuitive coordination. Trying has replaced doing. The student, unknowingly, is more comfortable with struggle than with success, if that success is tied to uncomfortable emotional issues.

Obviously, any instructor who wishes to do this sort of work with a pupil needs to do exhaustive, life-long work on his or her own emotional and spiritual consciousness, so as to be truly available to the student without projecting her or his own issues onto the matter at hand.

It is the naming and sorting through of experiences, rather than intellectual postulations that create the environment in which a physically coordinated, artistically attuned technique can be developed. Generally, as the singer notes the simple clarity of physical sensations and emotions, and as evidence mounts that sifting through them, both alone and with a teacher, yields greater results than years of attempted mental domination of the instrument, the artist gains confidence and begins to value the evidence of his or her body and heart.

Ah, a diet that embraces the body and heart, and frees the spirit to soar in song!

