

# What Is Control?

by Neil Semer

*A voice teacher and founder of a summer program for the last 14 years in Aub and Coesfeld, Germany, Neil Semer essays on the singer's desire for control. Is control good or bad? Is it really necessary for the singer? And, if so, how do you achieve it?*

The issue of control is a central one for all singers and, I might dare say, the human race. It's a word of conflicting meanings and intentions and carries heavy emotional baggage with it.

As opera singers, we need to know that our voice will function at the high level of a finely tuned athlete. Often this is under the extreme conditions of doing difficult roles with unsympathetic conductors and being directed by those having no understanding of the special needs of opera singers. We do long rehearsals, audition after long travel without time or space designated to either vocalize or rehearse with our accompanist, and work under other battle-like conditions.

Our desire for control is deeply understandable considering so much lies outside of our control. In this often brutally judgmental profession, we need to sing to a high standard most of the time. Failure to do so can lead to not being asked back, not being recommended to other theaters or conductors, and being labeled as a singer "in vocal trouble."

"We need control!" you might proclaim. But in my decades of teaching voice, I've seen this need often destroy people's singing and careers rather than help them find the security they seek.

Let's look at what control is and isn't. Singers work on their technique to gain

mastery over their instrument so they can perform at a level where all the notes, phrasing, dynamics, articulations, and expressive devices can be depended upon most of the time. What is hard to accept is that technique is not a guarantee of a future desired outcome. It's at best, a path to take that we reasonably hope will have an optimal result. We can't control the future, though we often fruitlessly try to do so—generally with the outcome of a continually rebelling instrument that defies efforts to control it.

Some future-based concerns that are typical among singers include:

- Will I make that high note in the next phrase?
- Will I have enough breath for that long phrase?
- Is my voice big enough, beautiful enough, or convincing in this Fach?
- Will that high pianissimo crack?
- Do the people auditioning like me or wish to hire me?
- Does this conductor think I'm not a good musician?
- Does this director think I'm hopeless as an actor?

Simply thinking these thoughts means that you are in some important way not in the act of music making. Fearing (being oriented in the future)—not

creating art (in the present)—has become your operative principal. The direct and inevitable result of performing that is not based in "the now" is physical tension that impairs the function of your instrument. Often, this tension is irresolvable because the negative basis for it (the singer's attempt to control the future) is disguised in cloaked positive language—in terms such as "technique," "support," or "control." Any action based on fear of any sort will lead you in exactly the opposite direction you wish to go as a singer.

I wish I had a nickel for every time the following scenario has happened in my studio. A singer has either finally connected to his breath, released tongue tension, stood more erect and balanced, released his voice rather than shoved it, sung with fuller head resonance rather than nailing it into his nose, or given over to some exciting but previously suppressed emotion. I then ask him, "How did that feel?" The response is often a stunned, fearful look in the eyes and the words "I feel out of control."

The singing voice is not tangible like an object that you can hold in your hands, yet singers generally believe a tangible grip upon it to guide it is possible. This gives a feeling of security and a momentary release from fear—but not from tension. Realistically, one cannot



Julia Toaspers, Elisa Martell, and Sue Doran having fun after singing in Ochsenfurt, Germany. Elisa is moving to Berlin to begin auditioning and Sue has begun a second career as a singer, being asked to give concerts in Germany, both as results of their attendance at the Neil Semer Vocal Institute.

hold onto sound waves. That feeling of “having control” over the voice is, in this teacher’s opinion, often really just laryngeal, tongue, jaw, torso, or neck tension. Real control comes from freedom and coordinated release in these parts of the body, which many singers first experience as a frightening “letting go.”

Sadly, the only security to be found in these former methods is a generally tense, unstable, unreliable, monochromatic, withheld, or pushed voice.

Our thinking dictates our actions. Therefore, finding a more accurate way of thinking puts a singer on the path to true vocal security. Consider the following

suggested changes in your language about vocal technique:

1) Rename what you have formerly named “control” more accurately as “gripping.”

2) When you sing with a clear plan and you sound better, healthier, and more positively controlled to trusted outside ears (including your own when listening back to a recording), even though you may have experienced yourself or your voice as “out of control,” rename that as “control.” Simply because it is.

Good singing is a controlled release, not a hold on the sound. Learning the gymnastics of balanced alignment, open throat, low control of breath, clear diction, forward resonance, and clear strategy for negotiating the passaggio are actions that yield markedly different and freer results than the impossible action of trying to control sound waves.

Modern science has debunked the idea

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of a singer "placing the voice" as an impossibility. The great nineteenth-century voice teacher Giovanni Battista Lamperti is quoted as saying, "In my method, when conditions are right, the voice places itself." He further refers to this ideal condition as feeling "ringing in the head, full throated and broad chested." These feelings of the voice being "well placed" are not things you can hold onto or control. These conditions (many of which were mentioned in the previous paragraph) have to be continually and imaginatively created in the present.

This creating in the present is not a fearful checklist of things to ask yourself, like "Is my throat open?" "Am I breathing low enough?" "Am I doing this right?" This fear-based thinking is stuck securely in the past, even if the past was just a split second ago. Instead, the feeling of vocal freedom is summoned by well tailored exercises and vocalizes to which you slowly habituate.

Many singers wish to believe that vocal technique refers to only physical actions, but I take issue with that idea. I recommend renaming the necessary but purely physical side of vocal technique (alignment, breathing, articulation, etc.) as "vocal mechanics." Our total technique, however, includes much more than mere mechanics—it is also the ear, the imagination and, most importantly and less often talked about, our heart and spirit's contribution to the vocal act.

I've had the joy and good fortune of training many great singers. In my experience, most of them either have a deep and developed spiritual center from which their art flows or—when in a younger or less formed state—are open to and interested in being challenged this way by teachers, coaches, directors, and conductors. It is so very important to be fully present. Doing exercises of physical, emotional, and aural awareness as your "pre-warm-up" are helpful in this regard. Then, the obvious and necessary training of the voice will yield much greater fruit.

This more balanced and holistic approach, in turn, helps


you to find the real sense of control (freedom, not tension) that can result in great artistry. To arrive there, you must keep the big picture in mind that technique is so much more than "how the knee bone connects to the thigh bone." We're artists, not mechanics, after all!

*Neil Semer teaches voice in New York, Toronto, Paris, London, Basel, and throughout Germany. His summer vocal institute in Germany is in its 14th year. His students sing in all the greatest opera houses in the world and on Broadway. He enjoys correspondence and is reachable via his website [www.neilsemmer.com](http://www.neilsemmer.com) or e-mail [neilsemmer@aol.com](mailto:neilsemmer@aol.com).*



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