

Tongue technique in classical singing?

"Let my voice sound
and my tongue sing..."

(line from a song by Valentin Rathgeber,
in: "Augsburger Tafelkonfekt" 1737)

For many a rather unusual or even negatively-laden idea - a taboo.

Although the tongue technique is obligatory for articulation when playing wind instruments, it is not taught to singers as part of their training, beyond some minor hints concerned with the position of the tongue, in the education as a singer. Too much attention to the working of the tongue muscle is often even regarded as harmful as it could lead to stiffness:

"... using tongue methods is mechanical rape for everyone."

(quotation from "Der wissende Sänger" by Franziska Martiessen-Lohmann 1956/63)

Everyone agrees on the fact that the tongue should be loose and free to move during singing. But this should occur unconsciously. To reach the high notes, the usual advice is to lay the tongue flat and to imitate the vowels in the "Stimmsitz" (placement of the voice in cranio-facial structures). "...From the transition on it is necessary to keep the tongue flat. The vowel «i» (English: «e») is only imitated by the sharpness of the tone in the "Stimmsitz".

(quotation from "Singen lernen? Aber logisch!" by Renate Faltin, 1999)

or elsewhere:

„...the position of the tongue at the front of the mouth while singing is a very antiquated and accepted rule and seems to be obligatory for singing. The fact that the world has seen famous singers who were able to form beautiful vowels, which have not been affected by a wrong position of the tongue (in spite of a high and slanted position), does however not mean that it is unnecessary to keep the tongue in a front position."

(quotation from "Der wissende Sänger" by Franziska Martiessen-Lohmann 1956/63)

The authors of the following text support vehemently their view that the tongue is not supposed to be of major importance for vocal techniques:

"...Furthermore, the next sentence is incomprehensible: 'The position of the tongue rules the work of the larynx.' The tongue is not allowed to help the larynx. It is only a subworker as far as the forming of sounds for speaking is concerned. This fact has always been accepted by well-educated singers..."

(quotation from: "Singen" by Frederick Husler and Yvonne Rodd-Marling, 1965)

Even in 2002 the following is still claimed:

"...There is an old rule which says: In order to form vowels, the tongue lays loosely in the front and does neither press towards the lower incisors nor against the teeth on the left or right..."

(quotation from: „Stimme und Gesang" Handbuch der Gesangsdidaktik, 2002)

This list could be continued endlessly. It seems as if a rule which has been set for decades has not been questioned enough, although sticking to this method has caused a lot of damage to voices.

Thanks to scientific research we know by now that "a tongue which is kept flat or which is torn to the back puts a certain pressure on the vocal cords and moreover, the pressure of the root of the tongue depresses the pharynx".¹

Actually, the vocal technique with a curved tongue which is described in the following is really not that new. The technique has its origins in the Old Italian school which unfortunately becomes extinct more and more, although the latest research results in vocal studies approve the old knowledge:

"Vocal studies are a clear proof for the fact that the tongue should be curved and taken away from the rear of the throat to allow the vocal chords free and natural vibration and to open the pharynx which is the main resonator. It is extremely important that the bottom of the tongue and the larynx become independent."²

Based on this knowledge, the Bulgarian tenor (opera singer), Peter Gougaloff, who has been doing a lot of research in the field of vocal sciences for 40 years and who has also worked as a vocal coach, developed a special vocal training which makes it possible for a singer to reach free resonance in all registers of her/his voice. This vocal exercises which include the tongue enable singers to form the most individual sound with a real balance of vowels.

The "Urvokal" (the old ancestral vowel, from which all other vowels have developed) «Ы» (Cyrillic) plays a very important role in this training. A lot of languages still have this vowel either as a full vowel or as a semi-vowel (e.g. Russian, Polish, Romanian, Bulgarian or Turkish). This vowel may be formed all over the hard palate with the tongue being continuously adjustable. Thus, there are different places for the resonance.

Resonance imaging with the help of a computer have proved that a tone containing the vowel «Ы» has the ideal spectrum of overtones. Moreover, the registers can be mixed perfectly and there are no more problems with the «passaggio» (transition of the voice to the high register). The right usage of «Ы» will also lead to an ideal, elegant vibrato (8 vibrations per second) through all three registers of the voice.

Peter Gougaloff attained the constant presence of the vowel «Ы» by pulses of the tongue which he trained by working with the vocal exercises he had developed. (see chart). Due to this technique, all vowels can swing freely in the (head) bones without losing their overtones. The result is a balanced, sonorous, vibrating, effortlessly sounding and individual voice with a lot of carrying capacity.

¹ quotation from the article "Die Gefahren einer flachen oder nach hinten gezogenen Zunge" by David Jones, 2000

² quotation from the article "Die Gefahren einer flachen oder nach hinten gezogenen Zunge" by David Jones, 2000

The perfected front position which is reached with the help of the counterpoise eases the articulation of consonants. It is not necessary anymore to overdo and thus to "spit" consonants, like often heard with «t». The singer does not have to exaggerate in an artificial way in order to be understood. Vowel and consonant become linked to each other without an intensification of the air pressure. This leads to a pleasant and natural articulation and allows a new colour of interpretation.³

Furthermore, the «ы» enables singers to use all three registers of their voice in a soft and physiological perfected way that will not harm the voice. Thus, the singer can work against the early ageing of the voice and by singing a piano, which is formed in "forte position", the voice will sound well-balanced. The following video shows a variety of the described exercises. Perhaps it will trigger the wish to learn more about the tongue technique.

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³ Unfortunately, especially in German song recitals, people still prefer a mannered articulation and dull vowels (with few overtones and without vibration). The musical and aesthetical viewpoint but even more so the health of the voice tell us that it is high time to get rid of old accepted customs and inflexible rules of interpretation.