Section Editor
Anne W. McCammon,
MD, FAAN

Overtones

C. William Britt, Jr., MD
Twenty-Four Italian Songs and Arias under my arm, I found the professor's studio in the Music Building. I felt my heart pounding as I knocked on the door. After a moment the door swung open and a large man about my age appeared. "Come in, Dr. Kraus," he said warmly.

"Call me 'Bob'," I said, following him across the room.

The studio was airy and uncluttered. An ebony baby grand sat near a mahogany desk and matching bookcase. The floor was inlaid with patterned woodwork, and the corner location afforded window panels along two walls. When the professor reached the piano, he turned and asked, "You're a neurologist?"

"That's right, in private practice here in town."

"When did you start singing?"

"I joined my church choir four years ago. I immediately found that I didn't understand anything Gail, our choir director, meant when she said things like 'pull up the string' or 'sing above the pencil.' So I decided to take lessons and try to sing better. Gail was kind enough to take me on as a student."

"In college Gail trained in piano accompaniment, like me," he said. "Both of us started singing professionally and teaching voice much later. She says you're also a musician."

"Well, I started college in piano performance, but I didn't finish in music."

The professor moved close, facing me. "I'm interested in singing because I like *people* who sing." When I had seen him on stage as a soloist in Beethoven's Ninth, he had seemed very tall. But his eye level was just above mine. He paused before continuing, "If I have two students here and ask one how the other's voice sounds, the answer is usually, 'Really nice.' If I ask one how *his* voice sounds, the answer is always, 'Not very good.' There's something in our culture that makes one dislike the sound of his own voice or refuse to acknowledge that it's pleasing."

He went to the piano bench and said, "Do you need to warm up?"

"I warmed up on the way."

"I understand you've been working on 'O del mio dolce ardor.' It's a great piece, Oh my beloved!" I

handed him a copy of the score and opened my book to the aria. He said, "Everyone's voice is unique. Let's hear the voice of Bob." He began the chord and pulsing triplet accompaniment while I took a deep breath and came in on time:

*O del mio dol-ce_ ar-dor, bra-ma-to_ og-get-to,
Bra-ma-to_ og-get-to, L'au-ra che tu re-spi-ri...*

When I started on the correct pitch and the first few phrases sounded confident and clear, my nervousness lessened. The professor stopped playing in the middle of the aria. "That's good...really good, actually." He pointed to the bookcase and said, "Take one of those hand towels." After I grabbed one he said, "Now, put your hand on the towel and rub the top of the piano while you sing, like you're polishing the case."

I started making the movement when he began the accompaniment and repeated:

O del mio dol-ce_ ar-dor...

I felt the surface of the case through the towel and the solid connection of breath support and voice. The richness of the sound coming out surprised me. He stopped playing mid-aria again and smiled. "What did you feel?"

"Well, the smooth, hard surface of the case, and the singing seemed so easy."

"We added a kinesthetic sense to the singing. Several years ago I was judging a competition. A young woman walked onto the stage and...froze. I happened to have a laser pointer in my pocket. I walked up beside her, shined the beam up and down around the auditorium, and handed it to her. She did the same thing with it and sang *beautifully*, just following that beam around with her eyes."

"Now I know why there's so much cleaning in operas."

He laughed. "Cinderella was scrubbing the floor for a reason!" Then the grin disappeared and he said, "We have these two selves. Self 1 is hypercritical, perfectionistic. Self 2 wants to communicate

Correspondence to
Dr. Britt:
CBritt@inwhealth.net

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The neurologic case, the characters, and their interactions described in this story are fictional.

and experience the joy of singing. Put Self 1 aside. Give him a clipboard and let him take notes, ‘that onset was late, the pitch of that note was low.’ When you take Self 1 out of performance, Self 2 is liberated.” He moved around the piano toward me. “With your permission I’d like to show you a few things that will make your singing even better. Okay?”

“Sure.”

He stepped behind me, placed a thumb over my occipital notch on each side, and rested his fingers on my head. “I’ll make some suggestions, and you’ll move your head in response.” I felt the pressure of his thumbs intensify, more on the right side. He asked, “What direction does your head want to move?”

“To the left.”

“Good. And now?”

The pressure was more intense on the left. I said, “To the right,” and turned my head slightly.

After a moment he asked, “Now?”

Feeling equal pressure pushing upward, I said, “Up,” as I stretched my neck, elevating my head.

The professor said, “The movements you’re making are at the atlanto-occipital joint. It’s two joints, really—each occipital condyle rests on a facet of the atlas.” My mind flashed to neurological examinations—checking Rombergs, watching eyes track together, the faces concentrating on my instructions... He continued, “Hold your head up, your neck upright.” He stood beside me and said, “There, your spine has the normal contour through the chest and low back,” as he drew an elongated ‘S’ in the air with one hand. “Your spine, pelvis, and bones of the legs are supporting your weight. Remember, our bones are for support and our muscles, for movement.” He returned to the piano bench and said, “Now, hold that position and sing.”

I rotated my head the least bit side-to-side, then I nodded slightly while holding my neck still. When he noticed, I said, “I’m concentrating on the proprioceptive sensation from the joint.”

Smiling, he said, “I’m not *that* familiar with the medical terms,” and leafed through the score. “Start at the ‘Ah, ah, ah...’ section.”

I started there:

Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah, O del mio dol-ce_ ar-dor...

When I finished the aria, the professor beamed and proclaimed, “Overtones! This posture lengthens the distance between the vocal cords and the lips, creating space for overtones to develop.” Then he asked, “What do you think about that unaccompanied ‘Ah, ah, ah...’ phrase?”

“Well, at first I thought the composer just didn’t have a musical idea for the transition from the last theme to the recapitulation. But as I’ve become familiar with the piece, that phrase sounds both happy *and* melancholy to me.”

“Does it? Oh, it hurts *so* good! Okay, this is a passionate love song. Make it *yours*—start there and sing that passage with both emotions, joy *and* pain.”

I started singing, and he resumed the accompaniment. After the last note I blurted out, “I love that feeling! Maintaining the connection between my voice and the breath support was effortless.”

He moved beside me again. “If you don’t mind, let me feel your hand.” He touched the fingers of my right hand, flexing and extending each joint. Then he flexed and extended my wrist and elbow before running his hand from my sternum to the front of my shoulder and from the back of my neck across my shoulder blade. “Relaxation of the arms and hands begins with these muscles on the chest. When they’re relaxed, the articulations of the ribs to the spine are free to move. Breath support will feel effortless when the actions of the muscles that expand and elevate the ribcage are unopposed. And when you stand with your spine supporting your weight, there’s plenty of room for the diaphragm to move down into the abdomen.” He gestured toward the piano and said, “A piano is prepared to make music. You just uncover the keys and it’s ready. What I’ve shown you is called ‘Alexander technique.’ It prepares the instrument for singing. That’s what Gail specifically wanted me to demonstrate to you today.” The professor paused for a moment before asking, “Do you play golf?”

Not completely surprised by the question, I answered, “I’ve played a lot of golf, but I don’t play much these days.”

He smiled and said, “I think golf and singing have so much in common. You can’t make a good swing if you’re not set up properly to the ball, and when you swing, the movements of the body have to stay connected.”

I said, “I’ve also thought about similarities between the two. When competing in golf, it’s so hard to give every shot the focus and effort that’s needed. There’s the same difficulty in singing, giving each note the energy and support it requires.”

“*Exactly*. That becomes the ultimate challenge for all of us in vocal performance.”

“I noticed that the runs up and down were easier.”

Handing me the copy of the score he had used, he explained, “Coloratura requires relaxing the muscles of the throat. Correct posture suspends the larynx in the proper position, so the surrounding muscles don’t have to adjust it.”

“It seemed that the pitch wanted to drop, though.”

“Remember, keep the point from which you’re

singing *high* for the resonance in the sinuses and facial bones. But the enhanced oral resonance may change the pitch a little. Feedback between the aural nerve and the brain will adjust it automatically.” Then he took my hand, shook it heartily and said, “I look forward to hearing you perform.”

The professor opened the door for me. Marching out of the studio, I said, “Well, you’ll have to come to St. Michael’s on a Sunday morning.” As I hurried down the hallway, dazzling tenor tones delighted my imagination. Eager to get into the car and sing, my feet barely touched the floor.

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C. William Britt, Jr

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