

F. Lamperti
The Art of Singing

ON THE DECADENCE OF THE ART OF SINGING.

It is a sad, but nevertheless undeniable truth, that the art of singing is in a terrible state of decadence; and this fact is all the more to be regretted, inasmuch as it is not only the opinion of intelligent persons, but also that of the less educated public, that it results from the inferior quality of the musical works represented as much in our leading as in our minor theatres.

This decadence has for some time occupied my attention. I have sought to unravel its cause, and, therefore, I have thought it well to begin this treatise with some reflections on that subject.

It is not to be supposed that the human voice, since the time of the great artistic celebrities has undergone any change for the worse; though certainly it is possible that some vocal phenomena should be developed at one period rather than at another; yet these are extraordinary exceptions, and it is not on them that we have to dwell. On the other hand, bearing in mind the moral and intellectual development of the population from that epoch to the present, it seems to me that the intelligence of those who devote themselves to singing should have also undergone that improvement which the flight of time and the force of progress have extended to all classes of society.

Notwithstanding this, forty years ago we could muster a numerous body of distinguished artists—a thing which in the present day we are unfortunately unable to do; and hence we must suppose that the music of that period, and the thorough grounding in the fundamental principles of the art undergone by singers before appearing on the stage, were the real causes through which we were then able to boast of so many artistic celebrities, striving not only for mere personal success, but also devoted to singing for the love of the art itself.

It is to these two points that I wish to call the attention of my readers.

The famous singer Pacchiarotti wrote in his memoirs: "He who knows how to breathe and pronounce well, knows how to sing well," and this is one of the greatest truths which study and experience have ever suggested to the successful cultivators of the art of singing.

At the time when the music of Rossini was in vogue, and was represented in all the theatres, was it possible, think you, for a man, though gifted with a beautiful voice and musical ability, to sing that music without knowing how to

breathe well? Certainly not. It was necessary to make of that branch of the art a thorough and fundamental study, and at every performance the singer made gradual but sure progress in developing his voice, in pronunciation, in respiration, in correcting faulty intonation and emission, both of which defects were rendered more apparent and, therefore, the more intolerable by the delicacy of the orchestral instrumentation, which was limited for the most part to a simple accompaniment.

Apart from previous training, by virtue of the above-mentioned repertoire, a singer, who might have had only the gift of a naturally good voice and a certain musical talent, found in the music itself the best and surest master; for supposing him to be wanting in pecuniary means or previous study, he could cultivate the art equally well, it not being considered at all to his disadvantage to begin in the secondary characters, the less so when his fellow-artists were the great singers of the day. And thus, with patience and application, it then was possible to supply the want of a regular training under the care of a master. At the present day it is different.

Vocal music, in order to assume a more dramatic character, is almost entirely despoiled of agility of every kind; this is carried to such an extent that by degrees it will become little else than musical declamation, to the total exclusion of melody. Without entering here into the question whether or not any advantage may accrue to musical science through these innovations, I shall only briefly observe that as the singing of melodies, though not absolutely true to nature, is yet productive of much pleasure to the audience; it seems to me a pity that the melodramatic system should be exchanged for one perhaps more realistic, but which tends to the exclusion of melody, and is hence detrimental to the art of singing.

Let the admirers of declamation frequent the theatres of drama and tragedy, where there is no need of orchestral music to intensify the desired expression.

Owing to the fact that singers no longer find the best of methods and masters in the music itself, and either do not wish or are unable to begin their careers in the slow but sure way of their predecessors, they rarely attain more than mediocrity in their art, and their singing is usually defective and unsatisfactory.

Another cause of the decadence of singing is the absence of the *musicisti*, a class of singers incompatible with modern civilization. This, while it presents on the side of humanity a just and necessary progress, leaves on the side of art an irreparable void by depriving it of its most assiduous cultivators.

Pacchiarotti, Crescentini, Veluti, Marchesi, etc., all most celebrated artists, having left the stage, appeared again in their pupils. The very fact of their retiring, while it deterred them from other distractions, obliged them to dedicate their affections, minds, and whole attention to the cultivation of the art, which they had made the sole occupation of their lives.

At one time famous singers, they afterward became masters of incalculable ability and experience, in whose school were educated that large number of great artistic celebrities, upon whose day we now look back as upon a glorious past.

The deficiency of good singers is also due in a great measure to the *impresarios*, in my opinion. Modern operas present more facilities than those of former times, to artists venturing immaturely upon the stage; a theatrical speculator hearing a good voice, even though it be wanting in the first principles of art, engages it, offers and sub-lets it in the musical market, and the treasure of a voice soon becomes badly worn, through the waste of the most beautiful notes emitted without rule, modulation, or support; the middle notes become weakened, the rest uneven, and the voice, which the music of former days would have of itself educated and preserved, is lost for ever.

To these reasons may be added what I shall term the *spostamento della voce*, by which I mean the present habit of considering as mezzo-soprano the dramatic soprano of the past, and of making mezzo-sopranos sing also the parts written for contraltos, hence the almost total disappearance of music written for the true contralto voice in the modern repertoire.

The same applies to the so-called *tenori serii* of the past, who now sing the baritone, to the *tenori di mezzo carattere*, who now strain their voices by singing the parts written for *tenori serii*, and to the little use made of the *basso cantante*. Those who suffer most from this displacement are the sopranos, whose voices, to enable them to sing modern music at all, ought to be exceptional. Obligated as they are to sing habitually on the highest notes of the *soprano sfogato* and on few strong low ones, their medium register becomes weakened and assumes a character of disagreeable inequality.

What is the result? Why, that the true sopranos, obliged by the rules of the profession to sing these parts, in a short time abandon themselves to emitting forced and fatiguing notes, and so destroy the *mezze-voci*, instead of which, had the music been properly adapted to the capabilities of the organ, nature would have improved and strengthened these, the most important notes of the whole voice.

To the raising of the musical pitch much of this displacement is also due, that again adds to the difficulties of *prime donne*.

At the present day one would consider as mezzo sopranos those who sang in *Otello* and *Semiramide*, and almost all the operas which Rossini wrote for sopranos, as also in the earlier operas of Donizetti and Mercadante.

Bellini was the first to write parts of an exceptional range, and what was more, he introduced the system of putting a syllable to every note, thus rendering his music more fatiguing to the voice. His successors exaggerated his mannerism, as much in respect to range as in the arrangement of the words. Much of this displacement may be attributed to these reasons, coupled with the

fact that syllabication in this music had in a great part to be executed by the head notes, which in men's voices, on account of their limited compass, was impracticable, and in women's, productive of much harm.

The fact that modern music affords such facilities to artists contented with mediocrity, is one of the chief reasons why the ranks of the art are crowded with worthless and half-taught singers, and is the origin of the general ruin of voices or want of fundamental study.

It seems to me that now, more than ever—as much in the interest of art, as for the benefit of singers—a man should apply himself to severe and careful study, and that, independently of the kind of music which the public taste may demand, he should strive to train his voice by singing the music of the old masters, more suited as it is to the development of his natural talents than that of the present day.

Here, I would observe that singing, being but an extension of speaking, the notes which we use in speaking are naturally animated, as they express rage, irony, love, pity, etc., and the words with which these feelings are expressed are emitted clearly. But without the necessary study, how would one emit, with equal clearness of tone and pronunciation, those notes on which one does not speak? how could one support them by regular and natural respiration, and failing that, how could one animate them so as to express the passions and feelings mentioned above? No matter how exquisite the taste or beautiful the voice a man might have, it would be impossible.

Granted that a man be gifted with these excellent qualities, but without a fundamental education, he may become a shouter, but a singer never. His, perhaps, extraordinary but uncultivated notes will always be cold, and in spite of their strength and sonority, always without expression, always wanting in true dramatic accent, monotonous, and incapable of varying their character, according to the meaning which the poet or the composer has conceived; wanting alike in thorough education and artistic experience, he will certainly run the risk of injuring and perhaps of totally ruining his voice.

In such times as these, when new music, new composers, and new singers are taking the place of old ones, I have determined to check, if not all at least a part of the abuses as regards singing, and to counterbalance the influence which modern music exercises to the prejudice of good singing, by some practical and fundamental rules, the result of experience gained in many years of teaching.

By means of these I hope to avert the ruin of voices and to obtain happy and fruitful results for those who devote their attention to vocal music.

I do not wish this guide to be considered as a new method of teaching singing; I would rather suggest it as counsel, which, if wanting in scientific merit, will, as the fruit of my experience and study, be of some value.