

Shakespeare

The Art of Singing

Part 1

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P R E F A C E .

THE art of singing, like other arts, has had its periods of development, culmination, and decay. The only period which concerns us here is that in which singing has been associated with the growth of modern music, and which may be said to date from the rise of the modern harmonic style in Italy in the 17th century. The art was then cultivated with great assiduity and success, and reached its highest point towards the middle and end of the 18th century, since which time the development of music in other directions, especially in relation to the orchestra, has led composers to a comparative neglect of the voice as an instrument to be studied on its own account. With the disappearance of that school of composition in which composers wrote specially for the voice, has likewise vanished, to a great extent, the successful cultivation of the art of singing.

The human voice will never cease to be the most beautiful of instruments when properly used; it will never cease to strike the chords of the heart with a directness and an intensity unapproached by any other instrument. During the time of the greatest professors and artists of this branch of music in the last century, little, unhappily, was put into writing concerning their methods of teaching and practising the art; and in attempting to gather up the threads of their work, reliance is necessarily placed on the traditions which have come down to us, and on a few recorded maxims and sayings which are attached to the names of the great men of old time.

In this book the endeavour has been to gather together these traditions and hints and weld them into a consistent whole. The aim has not been to write anything new, but simply to make an intelligible and useful record of the old truths concerning our art.

Should the publication of this work result in bringing his fellow-professors of singing more generally to the discussion of vocal questions in a natural way — to the study of that which is absolutely known concerning the human voice, in place of debating those difficult physiological problems in relation to which there are few settled facts to go upon — the author will feel that he has not laboured in vain.

THE ART OF SINGING.

INTRODUCTION.

SINGING, as ordinarily understood, may be described as the sound of the human voice when tuned to the notes of the musical scale, and it is usually associated with speech. Yet in a higher sense, we must regard singing as the art of combining tune and speech in such a way that the notes are started in fulness and purity exactly on the pitch intended; the words are prolonged, yet sound as natural as the most expressive talking, and every tone conveys the emotion desired by the singer.

To this end two factors are necessary; first, the breath must be under *perfect control*; second, the vocal organs must be trained to act with *unconscious ease*. If these essentials be acquired, the qualities of expression and intensity will suffer no diminution even in the largest buildings.

There are few who, on first trying to sing, have not felt themselves contracting the throat uncomfortably, and the more in proportion to their endeavours to add force to their efforts, or, as they ascend to the higher notes of the scale.

While singing with the throat rigidly held, the tongue is stiffened so that tone and pronunciation are impeded, the jaw, lips, and eyes are rigidly fixed, and the face assumes an unnatural expression. Under these conditions it is impossible to start any note exactly on the pitch intended, or to execute a scale except in a manner jerky or blurred.

Seldom at the present day do we hear the beautiful effect of a long note begun softly, then swelled to loudness, and finally returning to *piano*, — the so-called *messa di voce*. Only too often do we hear performers “scooping up” to sounds which should have been started exactly on the pitch and emitting notes painfully out of tune.

When we sing with the throat loose and unconstrained, the breath rushes out and causes disaster by compelling us to take in a fresh supply before the end of the phrase; and the more naturally we wish to sing, the greater is the necessity of learning how to control the breath.

INTRODUCTION.

The conclusion which forces itself upon us is, that *until the student has acquired a right method of controlling the breath he will not dare to sing with the throat open*. Constrained to adopt an unnatural position of his vocal organs, he pays the penalty by producing harsh, throaty, or nasal sounds.

It is therefore to the breathing that our first studies should be directed, viz., how to take in sufficient breath, how to press it out and yet economize it for the longest phrases; and in the next place, how to sing on this basis all the notes of the voice with the throat open and unconscious. We shall then see that the development of the latter branch of the art depends mainly on whether we have mastered the former, and that it means in reality an abandonment of old habits of rigidity at the throat and tongue, acquired partly through our language and the way we speak it, but mostly through the wrong way in which we sang before we knew the art of respiration.