

Session I:  
The “Mechanics” of Line-Building  
Artistic Singing:  
Line  
by  
Line  
By Line

Dr. John Ratledge, Associate Professor  
Area Coordinator of Graduate Choral Conducting  
Director of Choral Activities  
The University of Alabama  
Tuscaloosa, Alabama  
ratledge@bama.ua.edu  
www.johnratledge.com

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*Expression comes out of knowledge and experience.  
It comes directly from the heart.*

*Only when you know exactly  
what you are singing about are you able to communicate to  
others.*

*Nothing should be done at the expense of line.*

*Give me some feeling of what Paradise is.*

*You have to feel it—convince us—by making it meaningful.*

*We can over express in a superficial way.  
Sing with your true voice.*

*Channel the energy through the sound.*

*Sing me what you love. I'm just eavesdropping.*

*Through bel canto singing one learns how to sing.*

*The Italian language is the way of the voice.*

**Janet Price – Opera Singer**  
**Royal Academy of Music**  
**London, England**  
**20 May 2000**

# The 'Mechanics' of Line-Building: Artistic Singing—Line By Line By Line

## Notes

### Artistic Choirs

- Technical merit and artistic impression
- Expressive nuances
- Project inner meaning and great joy
- Communicate to listeners
- Audience, singers, and conductor participating together

### Line

- Basic element of visual design
- Connects two ultimate points
- Sets overall tone or emotion

*The most beautiful distance between two points is a curved line.*

**Three Elements of artistic expression:** sonority, dynamic, and tempo

## VOWELS

- Line explosions**—changing from one vowel sound to the next
  - Closed to open vowels or from open to closed vowels
  - Surges on long notes
  - Blocks of progressive, continuous sound,
  - No variety in color.
- The goal is to avoid explosions which occur while changing from one vowel sound to the next which ultimately destroys line.

## LIPS AS AN AGENT OF SOUND

- **Controlled mouth movement**

- The goal in this procedure is **controlled mouth movement**, which directly affects the sound.

## VOWEL GLIDING

- **The slow deliberate movement of lips**

- The goal is to activate the awareness that the lips participate in building line. By minimizing lip movement on vowel changes the integrity of the line can be maintained.

## COMPOSITE VOWELS

- **Preparing the space inside the mouth, formulating any shape outside**

- **Diphthongs**

- The goal is to teach that each vowel requires space inside the mouth, complete with an individual character and shape of its own, thus shaping and coloring the vowel produced.

## OVERACTIVE JAW

- **Chewing every morsel of every word** is the antithesis of *legato* singing

- The goal is to work for the slow, free movement of the lips, not the absence of any movement at all.

## CONSONANTS

- Can be articulated in 3 ways: elongated, clipped, or elided
  - Expressed in the style of the piece, in the context of tone, and as part of the *legato*
  - Overexaggerated consonants destroy *legato*
  - Dentalized consonants are usually the worst
  - Gradation for each consonant needed
- The goal is to work for a complete palette of consonant sounds, not just consonants for consonants' sake.

*Lord<sup>ih</sup>, mak<sup>ih</sup> me an instrument of Thy peace. Where there is hatred<sup>ih</sup>, let<sup>ih</sup> me bring lov<sup>ih</sup>. Where there is injury, help<sup>ih</sup> me to pardon<sup>ih</sup>. Where there is dark<sup>ih</sup>ness, let<sup>ih</sup> me bring light<sup>ih</sup>. Grant<sup>ih</sup> that<sup>ih</sup> I not<sup>ih</sup> so much seek<sup>ih</sup> to be consoled<sup>ih</sup> as to consol<sup>ih</sup>, as to lov<sup>ih</sup>, pardon<sup>ih</sup>, etc.*

## PHRASE ENDINGS/BEGINNINGS

### **Phrase endings and beginnings**

- Matching previous dynamic, color, emotion
- Rhythmic implications: Weak to strong, groups of notes
- Anacrusis
- Cutoffs in the style of the piece, in the emotion of the moment, in the color/timbre of the piece

## WORD INFLECTION

### •Natural speech inflection

- Stressed and unstressed syllables
- Natural sense of pacing
- Enhances the feeling of rhythm
- Dynamic shadings
- Negating beats (conducting gestures)

Richard Miller (The Structure of Singing) states,

Communicative language is not simply expressly stringing isolated words together. In language, we express ourselves through groupings of words that foster the progression of an idea through groups of entire paragraphs.

## COMPOSER'S MARKINGS

### •Ignoring composer's markings

- Articulation

•*Legato/staccato/melodic staccato*

•Vowel rearticulation

•Programming singers to respond to gestures



•Dynamics

•Crescendo

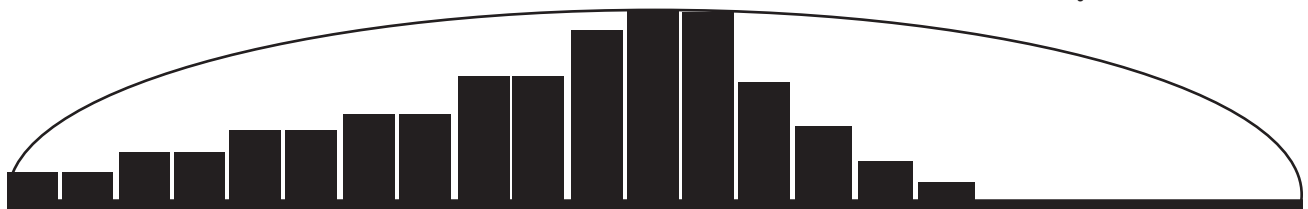
- Splattered tone/harsh, shoved sounds
- Think warmer not louder.
- Sudden soft syndrome (SSS)

•Decrescendo

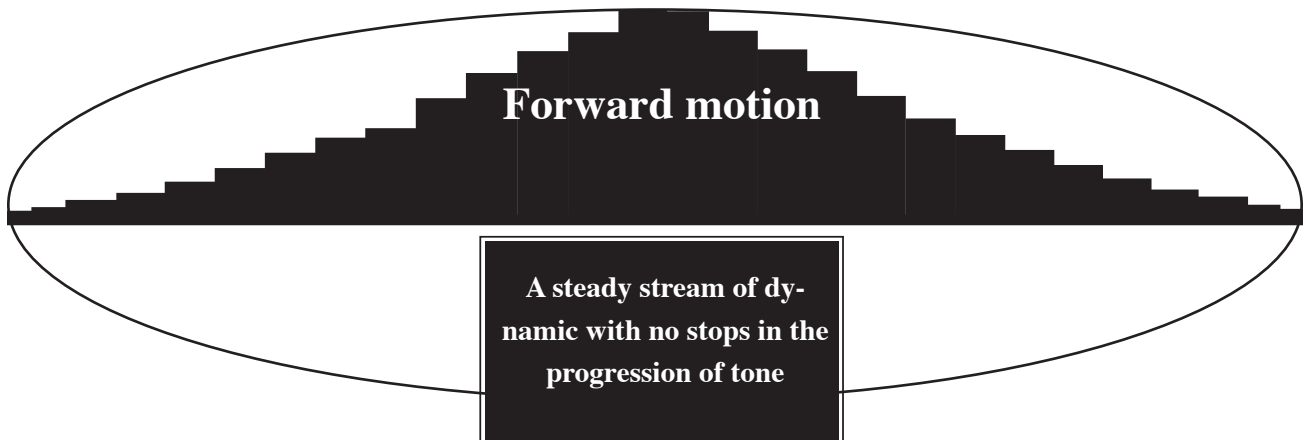
- Loss of presence and pitch
- No evaporation

**Blocks of dynamic gradation with SSS**

Sudden soft syndrome



**A dynamic, living, artistic *crescendo* with gradation.**

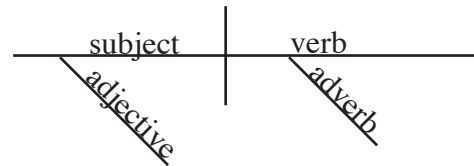
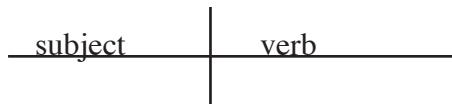


## GRAMMAR AND SYNTAX

### •Textual ramifications

- Defined by syntax
- Modify, amplify, clarify
- Adjectives modify nouns or pronouns
- Adverbs modify verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs

### •Diagramming sentences



### •Textual implications

- Target points
- Precision

## VIBRATO

### •As an embellishment, expressive ornament

- Maple syrup

## COLOR

- Dark vs. bright
- Breathiness
- Sung speech
- Color imagery
- Texture
- Painting with one medium

## **HARMONY AND EXPRESSIVITY**

- **Harmonic component of expressivity**
- **Dissonances as a natural pinnacle of a pre-planned line**
- **Voicing a chord**

Some personal thoughts about my music.

- Every word must be **thought about** and **responded to**, **colored by** the voice, **enhanced by** the shape of a line, and **communicated to** anyone who is open to listen.
- That choral music is a manifestation of real life experiences.
- That choral music is like good drama. It must tell a story.
- That there should be variety in characterization in good singing.
- That choral music of substance requires one's entire being.
- That to indicate an emotion, one must feel.
- That the singer must be able not only to hear, but to touch, smell, and see that which a poet has articulated.
- That singers must respond to each word—either by acting or truly feeling the emotion evoked. They must feel something or their music is empty.
- That the entire body—face, eyes, torso must be engaged to be convincing. The singers must not only respond physically and emotionally to the music, but also to the words.
- Great choral music is **experiential** and is not a spectator sport.
- Great choirs **communicate** with their audiences. Their audiences are **affected** by the **shared experience**.
- Absence of thought is absence of color in the voice.
- That the human voice is capable of infinite variety of timbres, and in order to communicate on a deeper level, we must explore the depths of our souls and experience.
- That some of the most life-changing experiences in my life have occurred through choral music, experiences shared not only with my students, but audiences here in and in Europe.

# Master Conductors Robert Shaw And Bev Henson *On Music*

## ACCURACY

### ROBERT SHAW

- *The notes are difficult, but no more so than the ones you are singing.*
- *It is true that God loves right notes—as a beginning. But for the ultimate in illumination, the bush must burn. And the flame leaps off the leaf—if at all—by way of the throat.*
- *The cage must be clean before the Dove will descend.*

### BEV HENSON

- *You must scrub music clean. Pitches and rhythm before emotion.*
- *The bigger the ensemble the less emotion needed. We need more attention to accuracy.*

## ALLEGIANCE TO THE SCORE

### BEV HENSON

- *In good performances, conductors do or obey what is in the score, rather than manipulating the singers.*

## ARTICULATION

### ROBERT SHAW

- *The attack is not the loudest part of the phrase.. Must have room for growth.*
- *For marcato, you must stop the sound between the notes.*

## BLEND

### ROBERT SHAW

- *Blend is a matter of intonation and dynamic and diction.*
- *Allow each note to bloom.*

### BEV HENSON

- *Blend is a matter of quality, not pitch.*

## COLOR

### ROBERT SHAW

- *Always remain within the sleeve of the sound. Allow each note to bloom.*
- *The voice is capable of infinite variety of color. Change of vowel, change of emotion, change of color.*
- *Invent resources if we don't have the whiteness to dark, vibrato contrasts, etc.*
- *If we get sensitive to pitch and color, the musical difference is wholly influenced.*

## COLOR, continued

### BEV HENSON

- *Absence of color is absence of color in the voice.*
- *Change colors as often as the composer gives you an opportunity to change.*

## CRESCENDO

### ROBERT SHAW

- *Crescendo only the amount of tone you can keep beautiful.*
- *Avoid splintering the pitch.*
- *Utilize a hair of a crescendo to sound "human."*
- *Tone is never without crescendo or diminuendo*
- *mf then crescendo, but don't push. Pull it out.*
- *A crescendo is not a spurt, but a gradual increase.*
- *Crescendo of dynamic, color, and resonance.*
- *When you see a crescendo, begin quietly. Learn to crescendo without a change of color. Change the dynamic without changing the tempo.*
- *Crescendo the phrase, not just the note. You must either crescendo or diminuendo; never remain static.*
- *Work for a "living, walking" crescendo.*

## DECRESCENDO

### ROBERT SHAW

- *A diminuendo should include a marked increase in psychological tension.*

## DISSONANCE

### BEV HENSON

- *When a note or notes is foreign to the tonality, one leans into the dissonance.*

## DYNAMICS

### SHAW

- *A large choir becomes human with an inner control of dynamics.*
- *Sound as loud as a pleasant memory.*
- *Note, change, change, change . . . . .*
- *Our pianos must be of enormous strength intellectually.*
- *Pianos must be of enormous strength intellectually.*
- *We operate under the misconception that loud is always good.*
- *Think from utmost mystery, ending in extravagance and majesty. Think from utmost*

## DYNAMICS, Continued

*mystery ending in extravagance and majesty.*

- *Introspective to brilliant forte sounds. Listen to the inner parts.*
- *Care enough to feel. The dynamics never sit....they are always in motion.*
- *We don't sing forte—we sing within forte.*

### HENSON

- *Dynamic change occurs with the pulse, not the pitch change*
- *Sing each piece within the parameters of its dynamics. Each piece is different.*
- *An ensemble should have an ensemble memory of dynamic levels, and must stay within the composer's dynamics*
- *No singer in an ensemble can hide. Each singer must participate in the crescendo, he sticks out because he didn't change.*
- *Soft does not mean puny.*
- *If a composer knew enough to write a crescendo, he knew enough not to write it.*
- *It is better to be vulgar than nonexistent.*

## FORWARD MOTION/LINE

### SHAW:

- *If there is a long phrase, you may have to breathe, but don't let us hear it.*
- *Just because the pitch ends quietly, doesn't mean that it doer's have to be taken care of.*
- *The last part of one measure is in anticipation of the next and should be serving the next.*
- *Almost never is the initial point of the phrase loud.*
- *Do not stamp on the first beat. You are spanking the note.*
- *Think line. Don't push sound beyond what you can sing beautifully.*
- *Arrive as though it was a search, a condition from which everything must fall.*
- *Each note is precious and must have an entity of its own.*
- *When you get to a note, you are just beginning to energize it.*
- *The longer the note, remember to save something for the middle.*
- *The longer the note, the more one must delay the crescendo.*
- *The dot is the loudest part of the note.*
- *Unless you put something on the dot, the eighth note is lost. Don't play dots by stopping singing.*
- *Change the note from its beginning to its ending.*

### HENSON:

- *Music undulates, not marches, across the page.*
- *When you begin the phrase, start looking for the climax. Then start looking for a place to let down.*
- *No two notes are alike.*
- *Move with the second note. The second note has to be different.*

## FORWARD MOTION, continued

- *Unlike notes make music happen.*
- *No note is isolated, but has relationships.*
- *Try to make notes uneven, even if wrong.*
- *Frame the marking, the note before and the note after it have to be different.*
- *Never follow something with itself.*
- *Don't let the heart overflow the brain, or the brain sterilize the heart.*
- *We must get every individual to the same place in the ensemble, before we can move the entire ensemble to the next level of artistry.*
- *In order to perform music well, one must love it more than one's self.*

## FLEXIBILITY

### HENSON:

- *Some muscle-bound men lose their agility to do the mundane. The same is true with a singer with incredible depth of tone who loses the ability to be agile or flexible.*

## INTERPRETATION

### SHAW

- *We must let the music become the vessel of the truth.*
- *Let's listen to what the pitches have to say about the music.*
- *Sing each note like you were writing it instead of playing it.*
- *Avoid a Baroque performance of a Romantic piece.*

## PHRASES

### SHAW

- *A phrase is a necklace made with beautiful stones all of a different size.*
- *No note is too small to have its own shape.*

## RITARD

### SHAW

- *Ritardando never sounds right unless the pulse sounds faster.*

### HENSON

- *After an inner grouping down, the next phrase moves in tempo.*
- *A ritard is one of the most expressive devices at your disposal, therefore, do not start it too soon.*

## TEMPO

### SHAW

- *Tempo is nothing unless everyone takes the same one.*
- *Make every departure from tempo conscious and unanimous.*
- *Don't allow vocal problems to interfere with tempo.*
- *Every change of tempo must be conscious. Never let it get away from you.*
- *Any change of tempo is a momentous event. Everything must be conscious.*

## TONE

### SHAW

- *If we fracture the tone, we fracture the spirit.*
- *The baton doesn't make any sound. Each note...a separate event.*
- *The world won't be saved by muscle, but by brains.*

## VIBRATO

### SHAW

- *Save the vibrato and use it as an expressive agent of the sound.*
- *Part of the arsenal of expressively, but should not be constantly in motion*
- *Senza vibrato. Add vibrato. Sweetly, then deepen and darken without changing the pitch.*
- *Vibrato should be conceived as an ornament, not a distortion. Work for absolute purity of pitch.*
- *Only use the amount of vibrato to add color, not to confuse the pitch.*
- *Use only the amount of vibrato that will keep it in tune.*
- ***Ladies, it's a color, not an illness.***
- *Ladies and gentlemen, Brahms didn't write a trill.*
- *Vibrato should be used for expressiveness and not merely a vocal flaw.*

### HENSON

- *Renaissance music and perfect intervals produce their own vibrato and richness, so do not use your own*
- *Vibrato must confirm, not confuse it.*
- *Use your technique to serve the score.*

## VOCAL TECHNIQUE

### **SHAW**

- *Music must not be a ribbon for the voice.*
- *We must not hear any acne in the sound.*

### **HENSON**

- *Don't let your voice be on autopilot.*
- *Technique is only to serve the music.*
- *Technique must come before talent.*

The Shaw quotes shared with you have been collected for over twenty years. Most of his comments about music and music-making were collected when he conducted the Texas Music Educators Association All-State Choir in a performance of the Brahms Requiem and at the ACDA national convention in Orlando.

Dr. Allen Hightower kept a journal while studying with and accompanying for Bev Henson at Sam Houston State University. Through the years, these statements about music and music-making have proven to be a tremendous resource and guide in my own work. Thank you Allen for sharing Bev's wisdom with me some twenty-odd years ago.