

How to Building and Control My Vocal Instrument when I Practice

Nan Guo

Leeds Conservatoire, West Yorkshire LS2 7PD, UK

Abstract: This article mainly discusses the requirements of classical vocal and the qualities that singers need to possess. Classical vocal has strict requirements and is influenced by different periods and languages, resulting in various singing techniques and song processing methods. An excellent singer needs to improve musical literacy in addition to having singing skills to enhance artistic expressiveness and appeal. A singer who does not have the musical literacy of self-learning can only sing mechanically. Only by mastering relevant skills can one analyze works, find emotions, and not damage the beauty of music. Music learners need to build a knowledge framework and fill it with music perception and so on. Singers need to integrate skills and emotions into the understanding of lyrics. In daily practice, I need to explore and master methods of self-learning and improving musical understanding. Through a year of learning, I realize that growth is gradual. From learning from others to innovation, a unique learning method is formed through continuous accumulation of learning experience. Having a good voice is only a congenital condition for singing well. Mastering skills and methods and engaging in strategic learning can make one sing for a longer time and better protect the voice. Learning experience is every step on the road to success for a singer. The more one has, the higher one can stand. Singers need to summarize from learning and practice and shape vivid characters through researching and controlling the voice. Building vocal instrument and controlling vocal instrument is something that singers should constantly pursue forever. First learn skills, and also let skills serve emotions and skillfully control my own vocal instrument.

Keywords: Singing Skills; Good Voice; Voice Control.

1. Introduction

Classical vocal is a singing method with extremely strict requirements. But under the influence of different periods and different languages, there are many singing skills and ways of dealing with songs. For an excellent singer, in addition to having certain singing skills, the improvement of musical literacy is also essential for artistic expression and appeal. If a classical vocal singer does not have the musical literacy of self-learning, it is difficult to express the emotions of the musical works, and singers cannot have their own singing style. Without these abilities, singer is just like a robot, who only knows how to sing mechanically. On the contrary, if singers learn these skills, they will know how to analyze the works well, and find the true emotions expressed in the songs in the analysis, and will not destroy the beauty of the music itself. Every music learner needs to learn a framework of knowledge, and then use music perception, music recognition and singing skills to fill this framework. Changes in the melodious atmosphere, emotional expressiveness, and ups and downs in singing will make a musical work flesh and blood. For singers, singing is not a recitation of the lyrics, but the integration of skills and emotions into the understanding of the lyrics. This requires singers to constantly explore and pursue in daily practice and master how to learn and improve their understanding of music by themselves. Through this year of study, my growth is gradual. Every new stage brings new inspiration. From reference to innovation, through the continuous accumulation of learning experience, I have formed my own unique learning method.

2. Control My Breathing Properly

Good vocal art music performances that appeal to the ear

and soothes the soul are the burning desires of every audience from its performers especially the erudite ones amongst them. The foundation of vocal art music lies in the proper control of the breath. (Lucy K Onyekomelu[1], 2022) The correct breathing method is the first lesson for every classical vocal learner, and it is also the basic skill throughout the entire classical vocal singing. Singers can sing better if they master the correct breathing method. All techniques and variations in classical vocal are based on breath support. For a singer, the body is my own instrument. It's not just larynx, it's the jaw, mouth, tongue, nose, diaphragm and every muscle in the body working together after active mobilization. Especially for singers who don't study for a long time, the coordination of different organs in the body feels like they are not familiar with each other when they are just learning. This requires a persistent and skillful training. When singers have fully established their instrument, it means that the foundation of a building is ready. This is also my learning goal as a classical vocal beginner.

Lucie Manén[1] (1987) mentioned in her book:

In the teaching of singing, respiration has always been considered the most important component in voice-production. And in the technique of classical vocal singing, a special kind of breath control is required. Breathing too deeply does not mean that a phrase can be sung better, but it is necessary to learn to control the breath.

I used to sing, I always inhale as deeply and as fully as I possible when preparing to sing each line of a song or my vocal practice, usually to avoid running out of air before my vocal assignments are over. In my understanding of singing, more air necessarily means better a support tone. However, "tanking" or "overcrowding the lungs" like this can unnecessarily increase the subglottic pressure causing the throat to crowd and depress. For shorter exercises and phrases,

less air is needed to power the sound. With an inspiratory hold, the exhaled air will be rhythmically slow and steady, and will not need to be filled for shorter vocalization tasks. It is crucial that the singer learns to accurately measure how much air is suitable for the upcoming vocalization task, and then inhale only the necessary amount of air. There shouldn't be a lot of air left at the end of the phrase.

My tutor, Geraldine Cassidy, accompanies me to do some stretches every time before I sing to activate my body and make my breathing more even. For example, make a 'si' sound, and make a circle with the crotch turning left and right but make sure that the breathing is steady. The abdomen is then tapped gently, as if waking a sleeping child. Finally, rotate the shoulders to relax them, which will make the entire back taller and straighter, so that the vocal ducts of the whole body are opened when singing. The core strength of the waist and abdomen also has a great impact on breathing. The stability of the core, flexibility, and the improvement of endurance will be more helpful for singing. Without good abdominal strength, some of the problems that usually occur with singing can arise. For example, the breath is not enough to complete a long line of phrases; it is impossible to control the breath to achieve a weakening or crescendo singing effect. Through my studies, I found that if I could use tools to help me practice breathing, it would be more effective than practicing with abstract understanding, and the learning process would not be too boring. I would place a tissue on the wall and blow on it smoothly so that it doesn't fall off the wall. This is not an easy exercise. At the beginning of the practice, I will use strong breath to support the tissue to prevent it from falling, but this will not last for too long, probably only no more than 10 seconds. After many days of tweaking, I found a kind of strength that overcomes rigidity with softness, which is amazing. I found that the tissue didn't fall off quickly without blowing too hard. It doesn't feel like blowing air, it's like using the breath to gently hold the tissue against the wall. The effect of this skill in singing is very significant. Because singing is not with brute force, especially in the high-pitched part, it is about relaxing and finding the right position to sing a very natural and transparent high-pitched. Another very important point I discovered when I was teaching a middle school student. His breathing method is the opposite of that of a singer. As he inhales, his abdomen contracts, most of the breath is drawn into his lungs and his shoulders are lifted up. When he exhale, his belly will bulge. Later I tried to ask a lot of people, and most of them were indeed as unable to use abdominal breathing as this student. The correct breathing method should be to achieve lateral expansion around the upper abdominal area during inhalation, and the overall abdominal expansion. At this time, if the hands are placed on the waist, the front and back sides of the body are connected, and the fingers are placed on the upper abdomen. You can clearly feel the strength of the hands and the abdomen resisting each other.(Richard Miller[3], 1926) And then hold the breath, allowing the breath to stay in the body for a few seconds. As you exhale, the abdomen will slowly retract until all the air has been exhaled. This is a complete and correct breath. This exercise is also called The Farinelli Exercise. I always use this method to warm up before singing. This method is easier to open the voice and protect the singer's voice than to do vocal practice by singing scales all the time.

3. Learning by Analyzing Italian

Italian is the first foreign language I have come into contact

with since I started learning classical vocal. It is also the first task I have to learn since I studied classical vocal. It is often said that Italian is the ideal language for singing because it is primarily a vowel language. Perhaps for sure, Italian is an easier language to sing than any other. Because it contains fewer vowel forms, and because it provides more forceful conditioning in terms of consonants. Music and language share significant commonalities in their biological basis, cultural meaning, and cognitive processing. Both music and language are expressive systems produced by the body. Each language may produce a different style and rhythm. It took me a long time to figure out how to sing Italian in a more standard way. A completely unfamiliar language can be very difficult for anyone. Especially not only to speak, but also to deeply understand and express in songs. Geraldine Cassidy told me 'sing like a native speaker and be confident'. She used the way of imitation to let me understand the meaning more directly. For example, she asked me to speak a sentence of Chinese, and then she imitated me. When I spoke very fast, she could only imitate the general tone, but couldn't hear the vowels in each character, so she couldn't speak Chinese clearly. Only when the words I speak are round and round, and every vowel is clearly spoken, without swallowing the word, without weakening any vowel, can she imitate me closer to the correct Chinese pronunciation. The same is true for learning any language, treat myself as a native speaker, and speak the foreign language with confidence and clarity. To understand a language, we must first start from its core content, the position of the tongue and lips, the maintenance of vowels, the position and resonance of vocalization and so on. In Italian, vowels are the main components of language strength and rhythm. Therefore, the standard vowel pronunciation is the basic prerequisite for learning Italian. The five vowels in Italian are 'a, e, i, o, u', but there are seven pronunciations, namely 'a, è, é, i, ó, ò, u'. Among them, 'o' and 'e' have two pronunciations, open and closed. When I usually practice the pronunciation of vowels, I first practice one by one, and practice the scales up and down respectively. Next, integrate all the vowels. I used to sing the five vowels 'a, e, i, o, u' on the same note in practice, extending and trying to make them as uniform as possible. However, the opening positions of these five vowels are different, which means that the size of the mouth opening is different, so I think it is very difficult to unify the positions of the vowels in a short time. In fact, the two vowels 'i, e' only need a small mouth, and 'u, o, a' is a gradually enlarged inner mouth. If I sing in the order of 'a, e, i, o, u' in my previous practice, the position of the mouth will be misaligned, and the placement of the tongue and lips will change drastically. But I can't figure out what the problem is. This is also why the oral position of each vowel could not be flexibly transitioned in previous studies. But in one session, Geraldine Cassidy told me that with only these five vowels, I can sing many different ways. This is something worth thinking about. It would be much easier if the five vowels could be arranged in order of the size of the mouth opening. That is, the order of 'i, e, u, o, a'. But why from small to large, it varies from person to person. Some singers are good at singing in an open voice, which makes it easier to find the spot directly. But in my practice, I found that singing the 'i' vowel quickly found the correct cavity position when I couldn't find the exact position. So when I sing the five vowels in this order, it is the most suitable for finding the resonance cavity or controlling the opening of the mouth. This is also the best way for me to shape the pronunciation of each

vowel. While this is a subtle issue, it's also a detail I haven't noticed over the years of my vocal studies.

Another distinctive feature of Italian is legato. In the song, a phrase should be sung smoothly like a line. The connection and transition of vowels are closely related to the coherence of phrases, while the passage of consonants plays the role of fusion and transition. After understanding the basic Italian pronunciation, it is very important to 'listen more', so that I can better familiarize myself with the real Italian language and have more fluency. In my previous self-study, faced with a new song, I would split a whole sentence of Italian according to the corresponding notes on the score. This method really allows me to memorize the melody very quickly. But when I listened to a recording of my own recital, I realized a serious problem, and it was this method that made the phrases sound very incoherent. A phrase is like a necklace of pearls, with a long thread connecting the pearls together. But in this way of splitting, it sounds like every pearl that is scattered falls to the ground. The coherence of a phrase has a great relationship with the connection between vowels and consonants. If there is no smooth transition or there is swallowing, blurring vowels, it will make the phrase sound incomplete and incoherent. In a phrase, where the vowel comes from, and where it goes, as a singer, I must know exactly where it is going. This is why it is necessary to be very proficient in the language. When the vowel note has a short duration, it is easy to have a passing and ambiguous problem. The word 'furore', for example, is easily pronounced as 'frore'. This will lose the vowel 'u'. This happens mostly in unstressed bars. In addition, when singing a certain vowel, the failure to accurately maintain the position and shape of the mouth of the vowel can also cause this problem. This situation requires more practice. Start by slowing down a phrase and repeating it correctly. Only the vowels are extracted and extended. Gradually add consonants as phrase connections after I've completed the pure vowel practice. It should be noted that the consonant should be issued before the vowel, and it cannot occupy the duration of the vowel, nor can it destroy the progress from one vowel to the next. This also requires stable breath support. In fact, no matter what language I learn, the lyrics should be isolated and read over and over again. Listen to native pronunciation and intonation to imitate. My tutor told me that as a singer, lyrics are the starting point for me to express my emotions, not only every sentence, but every word's meaning should be clear. In this way, I can know which words should be emphasized in the singing. After that I will write the meaning of each word of each song on the back of the score. It was a rare good learning experience.

4. How to Learn a New Song

In my last semester I studied 'Deh, vieni, non tardar' from

Mozart's opera <Le Nozze di Figaro>. In the face of a brand new song, the first thing to do is to understand the background of the story. This includes what period, what style, what characteristics and so on. This is also to better understand the song and to set the emotional tone for the whole song. Through this deeper study of the song, I discovered multiple angles in which the song can be played, not just limited to knowing what the lyrics mean and repeating the lyrics and melody. This opera is an eighteenth-century comic opera in four acts. The main content of this clip is that the heroine Susanne is loved by the Earl, but is forced to refuse directly because of her and the low status of the Figaro. So, together with Figaro and the Countess, they set up a clever trap to teach the shameless Earl. In fact, it was a farce pretending to seduce the Earl and let him know his mistake. In the end, the Earl was so ashamed that he apologized to the Countess and agreed to her and Figaro's wedding. Although it seems to be sung to the Earl, it is actually a song to express his love for Figaro. The song is divided into two parts: recitative and aria. The intro of the song recitative has only four bars, from C major to F major, the tune is bright and cheerful, and the style is warm. The melody gradually becomes gentle and tactful, paving the way for the appearance of the arias that follow. My research on language and accompaniment found that the whole piece sounded different from her other songs in this opera. The beginning of the recitative is very classical and elegant. In fact, she didn't look like a maid at this time, but more like a countess in disguise. The form of the playing has also become very rounded and symmetrical, making Susanna speak a little slower than her usual song. So in the way of singing recitative, it seems to be more composed and calm. The biggest difference between recitatives and arias is that recitatives are like speaking, telling the environment of a story or the premise of the story. That is to say, to add more chest resonance to reflect the tone of the speech. In the first two sentences of the recitative, the pitch area is low, giving people a feeling of speaking. Then the accompaniment of the middle four bars promotes the emotion, making the emotion of the third sentence more advanced. Compared with the first two sentences, the last sentence, although the melody is upward, the emotion to be embodied is emphasized and affirmed to end the recitative part. On entering the aria, the rhythm suddenly changes to 6/8 meter. The multi-part rhythm patterns are dotted notes and 32nd notes. Gradually attracting attention, so that the audience can also substitute emotions. It sounds like a danceable rhythm, but it's not very lively and jumpy. The 'vieni ove amore' in this sentence has a brief F Sharp. Aurally, there should be an atmosphere that suddenly becomes ambiguous, and the tone here is slightly warmer and softer.



Figure 1. Deh vieni, non tardar(part)

The biggest feature of the lyrics in the song is that they have semantics, which requires the use of singing technology to express the musical color of the work. The accuracy and clarity of the lyrics in the singing process are particularly important. But while studying here, I found that this sentence has a very important difficulty. Eight vowels appear in the short sentence 'vieni ove amore'. When I didn't notice the vowel problem, I sang 've-niu-via-mor'. Since the rhythm here is relatively fast, mistakes in swallowing words and obscuring vowels can occur if I am not careful while singing. Mistakes like this can be aurally uncomfortable for the audience and change the original meaning of the word. I found out about this problem because I was in class with my piano accompanist, Chris Pulleyn. He told me that whenever I sing here I have the illusion of wanting to skip at random. After I listened to my own recordings, I finally found out that he was indeed right. Sometimes singers have so many things to worry about on stage that these details are overlooked, but there is no way to notice them. So if I want to be foolproof when I actually sing, I must magnify all the small details a hundred times during practice. Chris Pulleyn asked me to try and extract all the vowels in the song, which is 'i-e-i-o-e-a-o-e'. Start by practicing these vowel transitions over and over on the same pitch. After that, the melody that is substituted into the score continues to sing vowels. Only when I am completely familiar with the position of the vowels and the direction of the melody can you gradually add consonants as a transition to a whole phrase.

These learning experiences and singing skills have also helped me a lot in learning other songs. But this is not a complete study of a song. After I have learned the basic content of a song, including the familiarity with the melody, the mastery of the language, and the different understanding of each paragraph, I will go to the artist's recording to match my understanding songs for comparison. The reason why I

don't listen to other people's recordings before learning is because I need to first establish my own understanding of the song and set the emotional tone of the song through my own analysis and learning. On this basis, listening to other people's singing is easy to have other discoveries. For example, which parts are handled differently, which part of the inhalation can be adjusted, which parts of the emotion can have other transformations, what are the differences in the shaping of characters, and so on. If I listen to other people's recording from the very beginning, I will unconsciously have an inherent impression of a new song, and it is difficult to escape from this understanding.

5. Analysis by Mirella Freni's singing

Mirella Freni's interpretation of the song "Deh, vieni, non tardar", especially the B and C sections of the aria, is really amazing. Section B is a lyrical 6/8 meter. When she sang this part at the very beginning, she used the intensified tone of the first beat to combine the rhythmic rhythm of triple time with the fluidity of speed. By strengthening the rhythm and rebeating, the combination of tone stress and breathing point coherently shows Susanna's brisk and flexible musical image. Especially the handling of the ending part of paragraph B makes it more dramatic. Many flashpoints start from 'fin', and she sings in 'soft voice'. But her whole sentence singing is not completely weak, but uses the breath of processing weak voice to gradually increase the intensity of the subsequent series of densely ascending eighth notes. At the same time, the graininess of the notes is maintained. Between 'ancor' and 'bruna' as a breath, but always keep the sound off and the breath. The interpretation of this sentence vividly shows that Susanna's inner emotions have changed from tense to cheerful in these short minutes.

Figure 2. Deh vieni, non tardar (part)

The most outstanding part of the C section is the two 'vieni' parts, which are also the climax of the whole song, which can move people the most. The first 'vieni' in this sentence, she chose not to push hard because of a long note. She used excellent breath control to start with a weak tone and make a crescendo. It fully expresses the softness and soothing of the sound. The latter 'vieni' is in sharp contrast with the former,

increasing the breathing support, pushing the whole song to the highest point and paving the way for the free extension in the back. The treatment here fully reflects the free and easy atmosphere of the characters and their ease. She used the smooth and continuous breath to gradually transmit the sound farther and farther.



Figure 3. Deh vieni, non tardar(part)

Her singing is consummate in terms of the beat of the notes, the support of the breath, the clarity of the words, the coherence between the phrases, and the control of techniques and emotions. From her singing, I deeply realized that the rhythm of the melody is a natural undulating like a wave.

6. Conclusion

For a singer, a good voice can only be an innate condition for singing well. Once I have mastered the skills and methods, I will be able to sing for longer and better protect my throat by learning strategically. Learning experience is every step on the road to a singer's success. The more I have, the higher I can stand. Singers must learn to summarize from learning and practice, and create a distinct character image through the study and control of voice. Building vocal instrument and

control vocal instrument is something that a singer should never stop chasing. Singers must master study skills proficiently, make skills serve their emotions, and skillfully manipulate their vocal instruments.

References

- [1] Lucy, K.O. (2022) Maximum vocal art in music performance: Indispensability of breathing and breath control. *International journal of general studies* (IJGS) 2(1).
- [2] Lucie, M. (1987) *The teaching of the classical Italian song-schools, its decline and restoration*. pp.35 Published by: Oxford University Press Inc. New York.
- [3] Richard, M. (1926) *English, French, German and Italian techniques of singing*. pp.42 Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data.