

The Power of Vocalises

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The Collins dictionary defines a vocalise as a musical passage sung upon one vowel as an exercise to develop flexibility and control of pitch and tone - solfeggio. This is true on a very basic level, but vocalises are much more complex and diverse than this. To begin to understand the power of practicing vocalises for vocalists, it is wise to consider their history, benefits to the voice, significance in performance, and the emotional understanding performers obtain through vocalise exercises.

Historically voice teachers believed that practicing in the form of a vocalise was absolutely necessary to vocal development. Pier Francesco Tosi (1647-1732)

was one of the first teachers to be recognized for his belief that singers must have absolute musicianship. In the 17th century, pedagogical voice training required students to practice vocalises until they were perfected, in order to access further repertoire. However, the trend of exclusively teaching vocalises prior to singing songs began to decline during the late 19th and early 20th century (Monahan, 1978; Taylor, 1914). This decline in popularity is likely due to the fact that teachers themselves began to find the vocalises boring, and sought to better entertain their students with an interesting repertoire. Additionally, some singing teachers believed that using extensive runs of vocalises (i.e. singing vocalises in rapid succession over and over again during the training period) could cause the student to lose patience and seek out another voice instructor (Cooke, 1921). Previous to this, students would seek out the most renowned vocalists to become their apprentice, giving their 'master' permission to withhold or give as much as they pleased - total control-, now teachers feared that their students would leave them for a different teacher should they bore them, or perhaps even not meet the parents' expectations for their children to learn "songs' not 'scales'" (Ruchita Rao, 2005).

The author of "Solutions for Singers", Miller, believes that "it is a mistake to presume that early training should be solely devoted to technical exercises" (Ruchita Rao, 2005). He believes that one should rather use them in conjunction with repertoire to help the students transfer technique learned from vocalises into the literature to be sung. There is an undeniable effect vocalise training has on the tone of the singer - especially beginners -, vocalises teach singers how to achieve volume correctly by using tone placement instead of solely lung power - this is resonance. Proper resonance and understanding the span of one's voice, is the foundation of performance, and is absolutely essential to effectively 'fill' a space such as a hall or theatre. However, students often want to move quickly to learning songs in order to advance their career, which in turn causes an inability to realize the benefits of vocalises in training. In addition to this, modern music is becoming more void of complexity and with reliance on amplification and quick-fix techniques. With the decline of classical music such as vocalises, technique and control has become less respected, leading to a disregard for vocal health. Despite the decline in the emphasis on vocalise exercises in singing, "these exercises incorporate key motor learning concepts that are beneficial to performers overall technique and vocal health" (Richita Rao, 2005). It is thought that this type of practice may eventually lead to a transfer of learning into various repertoire, that may then be sung with minimal errors. However, literature supporting the use of vocal exercises in singing improvement in the present day is scarce.

In performance, one requires a presence - energy - and resonance that will fill a space and evoke empathy in an audience. Vocal performances are not only the combination of language and music, they are a provocation on the most intimate scale, and a story to translate the intimacy that even the greatest scientists have yet to define. For performers to effectively evoke

empathy in their audience they must perform with apparent ease and artistry. One can compare this to the training of athletes; swimmers incorporate numerous exercises on land as well as in the water to develop their bodies, perfecting their stroke to create a controlled and seamless performance of speed; dancers train rigorously to have absolute control of their bodies to imbue grace into their art. So too must singers train their mind in translating the complexity of notes into language, practicing control over the chaotic beauty of sound waves flowing through human tissues. This is why, in the act of singing, when complex motor patterns are practiced extensively, motor responses become automatic and performance appears effortless (Miller, 2004).

As Claude Levi-Strauss once said, “music...is the only language with the contradictory attributes of being at once intelligible and untranslatable”; however, this cannot be true if the performer does not comprehend the deeper feeling behind musical notation. In vocalises, there are no words to describe what the composer wishes to be portrayed and felt. Singing is the only music that translates rhythm and musical notes into comprehensible words. Those words, written or chosen by the composer, are a gift that should not be the main focus of any performer. The power of vocalise practice is that it teaches singers to translate notes into emotion, a skill that brings a greater understanding to the music as a whole. Where words are given, singers are in danger of falling into complacency, into following the prompting of the language rather than that of the music. Through practicing vocalises, a performer is building a connection with his or her voice, a connection that leads to honest and emotionally true performances.

In conclusion, vocalises offer a host of benefits to the vocal performer’s technique and presence. With a rich history to consider, as well as rich benefits to the voice, it is clear the impact vocalise exercises have on the singers’ connection to the physiology of the voice, the emotional understanding of repertoire, and ultimately the performance. “Music comes straight from the heart and talks only to the heart: it is Love!” - Sergei Rakhmaninov