Tone Quality, Resonance and Style by Sheri Gould

Many singers today are particularly interested in style. Specifically developing their own personal style. Those of us who are worship leaders or serving on worship teams may often wonder what kind of 'style' is appropriate for us to develop—if any at all. There are certainly different styles of leading worship and even different styles of worship music. So what's involved and what's a good frame of reference for wanting to develop a unique—but attractive—personal vocal style?

UNIQUELY YOU

God has made each of us in a unique and wonderful way (Psalm 139:14). This unique design gives you a specific template from which to start when developing your own style. The shape and structure of your face, neck, vocal cords, chest, etc., all contribute to your overall sound. Recognizing the value in your particular gifts is an important place to start. Although you may be able to imitate others and perhaps mimic many different styles, they will always contain an element that is undeniably YOU!

TONE QUALITY

Contrary to what you might think, based on the above paragraph, you are not relegated to one specific tone quality. There may be some elements that are particularly fixed, but many can be affected to create the type of tone quality that you want. In order to affect this, you need to do some experimenting. Much can be learned but simply 'playing around' with your voice.

For example, when I was in college we were required each year to participate in the annual community presentation of the Christmas portion of Handel's "The Messiah". Although I truly appreciated and enjoyed singing in "The Messiah" what I did not particularly enjoy were the warbling voices of the many senior citizens that also participated annually. My girlfriend and I would roll out eyes and laugh with each other at the "weird, operatic" style voices that often surrounded us. One day, in a display of great teenage maturity, we decided to sing the entire rehearsal in a fake opera style-imitating those around us-just to see if anyone would notice. We had great fun that day and thought we were quite clever, and no…no one even noticed-much to our glee. But I learned something that day.

At the end of the rehearsal, I had actually discovered some things about tone quality and resonance. Believe it or not, having never explored those particular areas of resonance necessary to imitate an operatic style, I became aware of a whole new aspect of my voice as I spent the hour and a half singing in a new a different way (albeit tongue in cheek). Periodically in my teaching practice throughout the years, I have often suggested to women, who have struggle to get out of a particular type of tone quality, to try imitating a opera singer-just for fun. Invariably when they try this, certain area of resonance open up for them and it's an eye-opening experience for them just as it was for me.

RESONATORS

We have lots of areas to resonate. Some of them are able to change shape and some are not. When I teach vocal technique, I typically take a quick phrase (such as Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star) and sing it with an emphasis in various difference resonant areas. For example, I will sing it with a very nasal sound, or a light, airy head type resonance, or with a throaty "belt" voice. Then I can demonstrate how to blend different areas of resonance or reshape them to get the different colors available to each person. This is of course difficult to do in a magazine article!

What I CAN do is get you to feel some resonance in the nasal (sinus) cavity. Try placing your fingertips on either side of your nose and hum on an "N". You should be able to feel (with your fingers) a buzzing in your nose. This is an area of resonance that you can't change the shape of but you can choose how much of your tone you'd like to resonate there.

Another thing I can try to get you to do is to try different shaping techniques with your mouth. Your mouth is a large resonator whose shape CAN be changed. The main way to change the shape is by opening or closing the mouth by degree. If you open by widening your mouth, our tone will tend to be forced more up into your head and/or nasal cavity. If you drop your jaw you will round and warm up the tone. You actually change the SIZE, not just the SHAPE when you drop your jaw. You can transform your tone. Think of the difference in tone quality from a Violin or a Cello. Even if they played the same note, they would sound different. Opening up that area of resonance can give you some real flexibility with your tone quality.

You can even change the way a tone resonates by the way you shape your lips. Try to picture your lips like the bell of a trumpet. If you allow your lips to be loose and full, your 'bell' will help facilitate the best sound for you. If will help you to project as well (think megaphone!). If there is tension in the lips it tightens the 'bell' and closes your 'bell' somewhat. So play around with the shape of your lips by relaxing them and shaping your vowels outward—a big 'poofy' lip feel is what you're looking for. Pushing your 'poofy' lips forward, I frequent joke and say "Think Angelina Jolie lips". You may find that by doing a lip roll (blowing air through your lips while they vibrate—think like a horse) it will help to relax your lips and warm them up to stay relaxed.

By combining the resonating areas from the sinus cavity down through the mouth, you can find that area commonly called "the mask" area to resonate in. Different combinations of these resonant areas can provide many different colors for you as a singer. I suggest you spend some time "playing around" with this area. If you ALWAYS feel a buzz in your nose when you're singing, you're likely a bit a too nasal in your tone quality. If your singing sounds thin or airy, you're most likely resonating in the upper part of your head-behind your sinus cavity. This will tend you give you an immature sound. If you combine the nasal with the head, you tend to get a more "classical" type of resonant sound (not a real classical sound, but a type of one). This pseudo-classical sound doesn't fit well at all with a contemporary style of music. If you resonate in the head and nasal cavity with a raised soft palate you will likely get a 'hooty' sound. This is unattractive in ANY style!

Head Voice/Chest Voice—EXPOSED!

I would like to help shed some light on what I believe is a pretty serious misunderstanding with regard to singing. What I'm about to say will likely fly in the face of most current, contemporary singing advice you've hear heretofore. I believe the current use of the phrases "Head Voice and Chest Voice" exists primarily because of a misunderstanding of many things.

In years past when singers were primarily trained classically, they were taught about resonance and tone placement. Through classical teaching methods, students were taught where and how to place their resonance. As they moved through various parts of their range, they might become aware of the resonance reverberating more or less in specific areas. For example, as they moved into lower areas of the range, they might feel vibrations and resonance all the way into the chest. Therefore the term **CHEST REGISTER** developed. This was a notation that a large portion of the vibrations of sounds were being directed to the chest cavity as a place to resound. Similarly, as notes got higher in pitch, a student might direct those vibrations higher into the head area, thus the term **HEAD REGISTER** developed.

As people moved further away from studying voice in any kind of classical way and moved toward the NON trained voice of a contemporary or folk singer, a whole different connotation began to arise. Without proper training, control of the voice is lacking. Because the vocal cords are primarily made up of muscle, if the cords are not prepared, strengthened and trained properly there will be weakness in certain areas. As the weaknesses in the vocal cord structure remain but yet are stretched to capacity many different configurations of the vocal cords may ensue—not all of which are desirable.

One of the common things that happen is that many singers lose control as they get higher in their range and therefore the vocal cords come apart and the singer ends up vibrating the cords together only partially. This naturally causes a thinner tone because there are less of the vocal cords being used. Additionally, the space created now between the cords allows for more air to escape causing the tone to be lighter and airier. Some singers actually perfect this transition from the full cord adduction to a partial cord adduction and create almost a 'pop' causing the break to sound very distinct. In olden times (and other cultures) this technique is referred to as "yodeling". Now some pop singers strive for this anomaly!

This break in the voice is a nuisance to most singers and can be rectified with proper training. However, this process has become associated with the idea and subsequent misunderstanding of a head VOICE. Once a singer allows the cords to pop open, extra air flows and the tone can only register up in the head because the larynx is so high in the throat. Therefore people have dubbed this now a head VOICE, and anything below the breaking area a "Chest VOICE". There are not, nor should there ever there ever be two distinct voices in a singer. Many places to resonate perhaps, but not differently produced voices that are so very different in sound, strength and construction.

Having said this, I recognize that many contemporary singers have indeed capitalized on this untrained sound and incorporated it into their style. If this is something that you LIKE and want to do then that is fine. Many people however default to this style due to lack of training and it is an unwanted part of their repertoire. With incorrect information, many have been led to believe that they are stuck with these two voices and just have to work with them. This is sad and such a shame. Developing a style a one thing, feeling trapped is another.

I am frequently asked if the "break" is harmful for the vocal cords. The answer is no, not in the sense that it hurts the vocal cords by causing undo stress. However, the loss is in the training of the muscles to break. Muscle memory is a powerful thing and once they are trained to consistently break at a certain point, it is difficult to UN-train them. This makes the job of learning to sing properly with a full voice and resonance wherever you choose—a near impossibility. So I don't recommend developing that aspect of style, but I understand that it is popular and many, especially young girls and women, will be drawn to the style and sound that goes with it. Men generally do not experience the full popping and breaking of the cords mid-range because they are aware of their falsetto and recognize that at THAT point the opening of the cords is necessary to hit the extra tones.

Think PRETTY

So much of what we hear today is really not much more than a lot of vocal gymnastics. The singer seems to be trying to see how many notes they can hit in one word! A lot of attention is given to a belt voice trying to yell higher and higher on stretched, fully adducted cords. But what I don't see a lot of attention given to is: a pretty tone quality. Many of the tone qualities that we hear in contemporary music are very nasal. This nasality allows for a better maneuvering around the keyboard. A pretty tone allows for

greater enjoyment by your listening audience, So although it's always great to pursue a certain amount of vocal gymnastics—I'd like to consider myself a proper vocal athlete, trilling about with the best of them—I'd also like to think that I can create a tone that reach into your heart and soul as well. I think we would do well as singers to venture into the area of resonance and tone quality more. The result could be very…BEAUTIFUL!