

The Significance of the Positioning of the Tongue while Singing

The various “schools of thought”:

The opinions about the correct positioning of the tongue while singing differ widely. Mostly, the only agreement is that the tip or the front edge of the tongue should be located at the lower incisors. Beyond that, opinions diverge considerably.

- 1) Some vocal educators are convinced that the tongue should lie flat or spoon shaped. This is often accompanied with tongue exercises that involve pressing the tongue down with a spatula or a spoon, to “give the sound more space”.
- 2) Some teachers go even further and advise their vocal student to “press down the base of the tongue”. The reasoning is that, by pressing down the base of the tongue, you can achieve a lower position of the larynx.
- 3) The third group supports the view that holding the tongue in the “ng-position” allows the voice the greatest freedom. This way the larynx sinks down naturally and opens the throat.

Incidentally, there are also various beliefs among experts about the ideal resting position of the tongue. Just recently, during a conference, I experienced a very heated discussion on this subject between speech therapists, phoniatics experts and vocal educators. By and large, the speech therapists expressed the view that the only correct position of the tip of the tongue at rest should be at the hard palate behind the incisors; the vocal teachers felt that the best resting position of the tongue is at the bottom, behind the lower incisors; the phoniatics experts split into two parties, one agreeing with the speech therapists, and the other saying that, following the newest scientific studies, you can no longer say for sure whether the best resting position of the tongue is at the top or at the bottom.

Experience:

Naturally, during my work with professional singers, I have encountered various tongue positions. Interestingly enough, the representatives of EACH of the above “schools of thought” were able to produce a good, professional sound. The only important criterion seems to be the softness of the tongue.

At this point I would like to point out some false positions of the tongue that are certainly NOT beneficial for creating sound in classical singing:

- 1) Sometimes you meet a singer whose tip of the tongue moves far away from the lower incisors and rolls up near the tongue frenulum. That takes the clarity out of the sound and makes it muffled. This problem is rather easily corrected with self-awareness and self-observation in front of a mirror. The feedback from listeners with trained ears, who experience a clear improvement with the tongue in the front, can also be very helpful.
- 2) The problem is more serious when the tongue twists inside the mouth during singing. This is often already a case of an extensive dysbalance in the complete vocal system. Here, with a lot of patience, you have to try to find the cause of the twisted tongue, so you can then, step by step, regain a tension

balance while singing.

- 3) A tongue that “wobbles” while singing usually creates a restless, fake sounding Vibrato. Sometimes this effect is even produced by the singer on purpose, because he has a specific ideal in mind. The excessive wobbling of the tongue can be eliminated with intensified concentration on the supporting apparatus when singing, and with a conscious experiencing of the relationships between the muscles that lift the soft palate and the muscles that put the larynx into the so-called yawning position.
- 4) The long-term hardening of the tongue is also not beneficial for the health of the voice. When a singer, for whatever reason, lets his tongue become hard, the first voice problems are soon to follow. This usually happens when the vocal system is out of balance, for example as a result of singing too dramatic parts or of a general overburdening. In these cases the jaw and the tongue like to take over the “directing”. The jaw tightens, the tongue becomes hard.

Vocalists who battle with these tensions, and often despair, have to understand that, in this case, jaw and tongue “want to assist” the vocal system, that has gone out of balance, by trying to take over supportive and protective functions. Only when the complete vocal apparatus has restored equilibrium with its tension antagonists, will jaw and tongue relax again, and perform their real, truly helpful functions for a balanced sound creation.

Summary:

Several of the vocal educators who I hold in high esteem believe that “the topic tongue should preferably not be directly addressed or dealt with during the lesson”. My experience also shows that it is better advised to treat the functions of the tongue and the larynx, not isolated, but always in correlation with the remaining vocal functions. In some cases, though, (for example with professional singers with specific inquiries on vocal technique) it is imperative to work directly on the tongue positioning.

Especially when working with professional singers, who come with very specific questions that are partly vital for their career, it is often very important to focus special attention to the topic “tongue position”. Professional singers already possess a solid framework of vocal technique and experience, that sometimes, due to the tough professional life or because of small technical shortcomings, has gone into a tailspin. If, in such a case, while working on vocal technique, you discover that jaw and tongue are no longer functioning smoothly, you have to try to identify the causes of these malfunctions on one hand, and to apply tongue exercises, that are fitted as closely as possible to the respective problem, on the other hand.

Since tensions in the jaw are mostly accompanied by false positioning of the tongue or by tensions of the tongue base, you should devote your attention first of all to the loosening of the jaw joint. Only then can you begin to arouse a consciousness of the lingual functions while singing.

Exercises for the loosening of the tongue base:

One exercise that I only recommend experienced vocalists (less experienced singers can misunderstand much and hurt their voice from too lengthy or too rigorously executed exercises, rather than to benefit from them!!!) is singing with the tongue stretched out. Very efficient here is a combination of staccato and legato on the vowel “i” or “a” (4 notes in staccato, then 5 in legato, for example: g-g-g-g-f-e-d-c). In the beginning, if the singer has problems with a tense tongue base, he will have great difficulty keeping the tongue out while singing. The voice can sound aspirated or not sharp enough. With time (and that is often surprisingly quick), the singer will learn to let the base of the tongue become soft and, subsequently, he will find out for himself whether it is more comfortable for him to hold the back part of the tongue a little flatter or more toward the “ng-position”. Now the notes will sound clean and clear, despite the protruding tongue, which is a definite sign for a restored and healthy function.

To conclude the discussion about the correct position of the tongue while creating sound, I can say, out of my experience, that the most important criteria are the correct position of the anterior tongue rim at the lower incisors on one hand, and the softness and flexibility of the tongue base on the other hand.

Whether the tongue is soft and rather flat or soft and held slightly arched upwards in the back can be influenced by criteria like the ratio between the length and size of the oral cavity and the length of the tongue, etc..., and should not be taken one-sidedly as a “conditio sine qua non”, as long as the other functions and the sound-making aren’t impaired.