Thoughts on the Voice: a 1993 Alfredo Kraus masterclass transcription.

"There has never been so much enthusiasm for the singing art, nor have there been so many students and teachers as of late years. And it is precisely this period which reveals the deterioration of this divine art and the almost complete disappearance of genuine singers, and worse, of good singing teachers."

G. B. Lamperti from "Preventing the Decadence of the Art of Singing" published in 1891.

Simply stated, the approach to the voice described in Lamperti terminology can be summarized as 'two points in the body with a line of air running between'. Another way to think of this is in the formula "breath + resonance=the desired sound". Having taught for many years, I know it is easier to speak about the 'simplicity' of voice production than to achieve it. When considering non-classical sounds, the use of the resonance still cannot be ignored. The position will be modified but the basic formula remains the same. Specific exercises strengthen correct vocal function and coordination in guided study with an expert teacher. The teacher monitors these elements of production with the student as s/he exercises to develop control.

There will always be an ongoing debate about 'proper' vocal technique. The following transcription from a 1993 Alfredo Kraus masterclass demonstrates this. Do not forget Kraus was still singing at the end of his very long and illustrious career with unmatched artistry, unblemished vocal color and tone, and faultless legato. He powerfully projected the high Cs and Ds without sounding tired or constricted at all. I heard him do this myself when he was 63 years of age. I still remember my astonishment at the freshness of his sound, his ease of tone and production, and the size and precision of all the high C's in "Mes Amis". Very few, if any, singing today (most of whom are younger than 63!) begin to approach the artistry Mr. Kraus so masterfully demonstrated throughout his long career. The Alfredo Kraus masterclass transcription follows below.

-------Maria Fattore

Vocal Technique for the 21st century performer

"Thank you for you warm welcome. I am pleased to see that so many of you have joined us for our friendly chat this afternoon. I must first say that the voice is a mystery. It is not tangible. It is a sound and not at all material. We cannot even hear how it really sounds, because our ears perceive at the same time both an external and internal sound, so we cannot understand what our own voice in like. I repeat: we cannot touch it, we cannot see it. We can see a piano, but not the voice. However it can be listened to and this is its mystery. It is the most fascinating musical instrument that exists, because are we ourselves the instrument, and we control it by means of internal sensations.

Why do we always hear people talking about voice placement without ever giving an explanation? We say "Putting the voice in the mask" and the reason for this term is that placing the voice correctly we use the internal cavities behind our facial bones (the so called "mask") as a natural amplifier, because in the throat we have none. Quite otherwise, the area that surrounds the vocal cords tends to absorb the sound as it is made of soft mucous tissue and flesh. It is up to us to project it, with the use of a column of air that passes through the vocal cords, as close to the listener as possible, as "forward" as possible. The further forward the sound is placed, the closer to the ear of the listener it is. The further forward the sound is the more it is sustained in the mask. The more it is sustained in the mask the better we use the facial amplifiers (ie. the cavities we were speaking of before: the frontal sinuses, the nasal sinuses, etc.).

Why do we say voice in the "mask"? We say so because a very intelligent person discovered that there is one sound that is naturally placed in the facial amplifiers, it is the Latin sounding vowel "'i" (as in igloo). It is also the least tiring vowel to sing on. When we say "i" the sound is already there, forward, and correctly placed in the mask, when we say "e" (as in excellent) we notice that in respect to the "i" it is further back, as for the "a'" (as in arrive) we may as well wave good-bye, for the sound sinks completely into the throat. However when we talk we can mostly get away with this, even if many people end up having to go to specialist voice doctors (phoniatritians) because they speak badly. If we could manage to put all the sounds in the position of the "i" simply while talking, there would be no work for these doctors". The "i" vowel opens the throat "There is a real obsession in most schools of singing: that of darkening the voice. But why should I darken my voice if it is naturally clear? It is nature who decides if a voice is clear and bright or dark and rich, we cannot make it become so by artificial colouring. Many of my colleagues, (even famous ones), when they come to a latin "i" tend to sing a French "u", or when they come to a latin "c" they pronounce it "ö" (as in earth), instead of a" they say "c". This is all mistaken. It is wrong to think that this darkening of the sound helps technique and rests the voice: this method sends the voice backwards into the throat, making it lose colour and sonority. Up until a short time ago all that I am saying was mere theory (put to practical use by those singers who have a correct technique, unfortunately they are hard to come by). Now thanks to new studies, and to a video made by professor Tapia of the Santandér University in Spain, we are able to actually see the movements of the vocal chords and the surrounding area during the emission of the voice. The revelations are amazing. It can be clearly seen that the vowel that most widens the cavities (the famous "open throat") is the "i" the weakest vowel. They have also measured the sound frequencies, and the results show that the "i" has the largest number of frequencies.

How can we explain this? Simple: the "i" may seem small but it has the right resonance, it is sustained in the natural amplifiers and therefore has a larger number of frequencies, you can hear it better. Volume doesn't count. The sound must vibrate correctly and carry well arriving to every listener in an auditorium. As you can see studying singing simply becomes a matter of placing the voice in the natural position of the "i". That is all. Seems easy, doesn't it ? I am no genius, neither am I a freak: if I am able to do it so is anyone else. The problem is that very few people have talked about this until now. It has become a technique in disuse. When I debuted at the Rome Opera a Spanish friend of mine presented me to Giacomo Lauri Volpi. Lauri Volpi himself accompanied me at the piano "as I sang "Questa o quella" and "La donna è mobile". He exclaimed straight away: This is the right technique. These days nobody sings like this anymore". He also told me to be careful in my choice of repertory, because if I kept to my correct repertory I would be able to continue singing for a long time. Lauri Volpi knew what he was talking about!

Everybody has their virtues and their defects. I think that Lauri Volpi, apart from the style and taste of his time, had an excellent technique. He sang a bit of everything, this is true... even if he told me to he

careful of my repertory. On the other hand, it was customary to do so then. He was, in my opinion a "heroic tenor" but he also sang light lyric roles with the aid of a reinforced falsetto. Today this may be questionable, but then it was perfectly acceptable. I think that both Lauri Volpi and Gigli denaturalised their voices by the use of this reinforced falsetto. They were also somewhat lacking in taste, as this is a very dated and strange way of lightening the voice.

But besides all this, Lauri Volpi had a good technique, based on the principals I have just explained to you, and what's more, he breathed excellently." Intercostal-diaphragmatic breathing "Lauri Volpi confirmed that the right breathing method is "intercostal- diaphragmatic". When we open our ribs as widely as possible the elastic membrane we call the diaphragm is completely flattened. In this way it is able to sustain the column of air that is needed to sing. This is very important: while inspiring all the ribs widen, then you must sustain by increasing the outwards pressure of the diaphragm, so that it remains as flat as possible during the whole process. It is wrong to pull in your stomach while exhaling, I'm sorry if someone disagrees. By pulling in your stomach the membrane loses tension and can no longer sustain the sound. Therefore, to sustain the sound the diaphragm must remain tense and as flat as possible, and during the emission of the breath you must push outwards. This is all. Of course there are many small tricks and sensations to think about during study. They may seem stupid, but are often very useful. To understand singing we need a special language, and also a lot of imagination. It cannot be explained in any other way. It is not like the piano that we can touch, and that has visible keys on which we push. A person with little imagination will always have difficulty in studying singing. Great difficulty."

"An example: let's imagine that there is a small hole in our forehead, between our eyes, and that it is from this opening that the sound passes. This hole is always the same size, it will never change. If this opening is the right size for the "i" (igloo), and it passes through it perfectly (and it would seem so) how can the "e" (excellent) which is larger, and the "a" (arrive) larger still ever pass through it? Of course if I had a magic power that automatically reduced the larger vowels making them lighter and placed higher they would be able to pass easily. But instead it seems almost impossible to put the "e" and "a" sounds into the same opening as that of the "i". To do this we must be assisted by our facial muscles. The heavier and the larger the vowel is, the more we must lift it by raising our cheek muscles, lightening the sound as we assend towards the high notes. Many singers pronounce "ö" (as in soon) and "'eu" (as in earth) with their mouths tightly pureed, or open in a 0-shape, without moving their facial muscles at all. It would be best to remember that in singing neither "u" (as in book) or"'o" (as in octopus) exist, even if unfortunately sometimes we are obliged to sing them. The "u" is the most difficult of all, as the "o" we may pronounce like a French "'a". For example the word "amore", correctly become "am-a-re", as if you were saying the Italian verb "amare" and not the noun "amore". The "u", however, has hardly any frequencies so we have to make do by putting it as near as possible to the "i", in the cavities surrounding the nose. Be careful, do not put it in the nose. Many people tend to confuse the two things.

People, used to hearing voices placed in the throat, hear a correctly placed voice and exclaim:" He is singing in his nose" It is true that we are close to the nose, but we are not in the nose. I can easily block my nose and continue to sing or speak when my voice is sustained in the "mask". There are people who have difficulty in understanding this difference because they are used to hearing guttural or backwards placed voices. It is a problem for that listener to resolve. We must go ahead and forget about the people who don't want to understand.

Another useful example is to consider the length of the piano strings: the low notes have long strings, the high ones have short strings. Let us think that our vocal chords are not in our throat, where we

cannot control them, but between the eyes where we can manipulate them thanks to the air pressure exerted by the diaphragm. Now let us make believe that we are singing normally and climbing towards the high notes. As we increase outwards pressure of the diaphragm, therefore the air pressure, the vocal chords are shortened, and the sound becomes higher and more resonant. It is like a river that is at first wide and calm but when the banks tighten it begins to flow faster and with more force".

Avoid an "0", shaped mouth "Another thing to avoid is the 0 shaped mouth that so many singing teachers recommend: a round mouth and the chin lowered. One must articulate logically, using the upper jaw, and not the lower one. If you lower the chin the sound becomes closed, while using the upper jaw and keeping the lower one still gives much more space and sonority to the voice. A few days ago I was watching the Callas Competition on the television, and I was particularly struck by the mezzosoprani who were amongst the finalists. It was easy to understand that their teachers had always told them: "Cover, darken the sound for you are a mezzosoprano" (it would be interesting to see if they actually were mezzosoprani), the poor girls kept darkening, losing both colour and sonority, and sending the voice backwards. When, suddenly, on the high notes they were physiologically forced to open their mouths wide and lift their cheeks, the sound became far more brilliant.

This is the basis of singing. Everyone has their own individual instrument, each is different from the next. But there is only one technique. The fact that many people manage to sing with other techniques does not mean anything there are voices that are as strong as iron, that can survive any sort of treatment. However they all have their defects, and serious ones at that. Try listening to how many tenors fail the "To-o-sca. Sei tu" passage from Mario Cavaradossi's first aria! This is because they almost all say Tu-u scou strangling the high B flat and sending the voice backwards. Instead you must forget the "o" and think of a dark "a". The audience will hear a clear, easy "To-o-sca, but you have really said "Ta-a-sca". These seem like silly little tricks, perhaps they are, but there is no escaping from them."

[Alfredo Kraus answers questions from the students]

Q: Can you explain how to approach a note?

AK: You must forget about the throat and you must drop the sound from a high downwards, as if it came from above your head. In this way the note will be perfectly clean from the beginning, and stylistically correct, without those awful portamenti from below, that touch the throat, or hiccups. Think about those small balls that balance on top of water shoots in village fairs: the pressure must be always maintained or else the ball falls off. It is the same sort of mechanism that works for the breath in sound production. You must maintain a constant air pressure, and sustain every note, including the descending ones, keeping the position always high; the notes preceding a high note are particularly important, they function like the steps of a ladder."

Q: What about the passagio?

AK: I never think about the passaggio (or the so called "break" between the registers). The further I climb the more I increase the pressure, raise higher the position, and widen the sound. It almost feels as if your very head is widening to give more space to the voice. Like when I want to call to a friend standing on the other side of the street: I don't shout "üüü !" which is a tight and closed sound, I shout ."aeeee !" which is open and wide. Almost every teacher makes his student close the sound, cover it, or turn it. Some even say you must vomit it. This is not the right way to do things."

Q: I would like to ask you to explain the breathing again, because singing teachers are very often so confusing on the subject. Did you say that during expiration you must push downwards?

AK: No, not at all, not downwards: outwards! When I widen my ribs as much as possible and begin to emit the sound I feel as if there are external forces that pull my diaphragm, extending it always further. These forces are, of course, not external but inside my own body. It is I who push outwards.

Q: But doesn't the stomach have to be pulled in during the process of exhalation ?

AK: No, never. Singing is the simplest thing in the world, but many people seem to want to complicate it. I never talk about the passaggio: there are various changes of registers, a low register, a middle register and a high register, but there is no change in position. We do not have various throats in different parts of our body, but only one, and one position in which we can control it. Why make such problems over the passaggio? Many people make a sort of vomiting sound when they "pass", a sort of "augh !" that instead of opening the throat closes it. The point of resonance is the same for every sound, chest voice and head voice. Women have great facility in their chest voice, however it must also have a high placement. We use technique to render similar all the notes in our range, without the need of so called breaks or passaggi. If someone had a problem on their high or low notes what should they do? What passaggio should they look for? Should they pass over a bridge, or in a tunnel perhaps?

Q: You criticised the reinforced falsetto used by Lauri Volpi and Gigli, but I find the mezzavoce used by Gigli sublinie. Is the mezzavoce out of fashion as well?

AK: The mezzavoce is out of fashion because nobody knows how to produce it. However I never spoke about mezzavoce, I spoke about reinforced falsetto. They abused of this falsetto, while mezzavoce is quite another thing. Once we have asserted that the "i" vowel is the most open and free of all, we can do nothing else than attempt to put all the other vowels in the same position. It is obvious that there are other parts of our phoniatrical aparatus that participate in forming the sound. They are the mouth, the larynx, the pharyngical cavities, etc., but we cannot control them consciously. We can only manipulate the voice once it is in the facial amplifiers, starting from the point of the "i" which has the highest position, and, therefore, is the most distant from the throat.

Q In 1964 I remained very impressed by Luciano Pavarotti who sang La Traviata at the Rome Opera. Today his voice has become more robust and he has changed repertory. Do ion think this is a correct evolution?

AK: Let's forget about Pavarotti. I think that a correct technique allows a voice to maintain its best features intact throughout the years....

Q: Excuse me, but I have always heard that a voice becomes more robust as time goes by...

AK: Look: Gigli started his career singing the repertory of a light lyric without being one, this doesn't mean anything. Juan Oncina, one of my colleagues, always sung parts for a light tenor. Once upon a time, thanks to a frequent use of falsetto or mezzavoce, you could sing the light lyric repertory and at the same time many works of the verismo school. Caruso did so at the beginning of his career, but he did not really have a light voice. Why should a voice change? Then should all our configuration change? It is clear that with time we grow older, but our high remains the same. I may put on three kilos of weight, or lose five kilos, but I won't change that much. Technique must help preserve the voice as best as possible during the years. Of course there will always be some slight change as time

goes by, the voice might darken slightly, or might gain sonority in the low notes, but mainly the vocal features must remain the same. Certain tenors begin their career singing the "Gelida manina", in the original key, and only five years later they have to lower it by half a tone. Does this seem right to you? What has happened? It is simple: they have rendered their voice heavy, pushing on the middle register and losing the high notes. It is not natural. Any respectable tenor must have a high C!

Q: Could please explain, once again, the correct method of breathing?

AK: You haven't understood it yet?

Q: I have heard different theories on this subject...

AK: I only have one. The breathing method is intercostal-diaphragmatic. You don't push your stomach out, or pull it in. You must widen your ribs thus flattening the diaphragm: once the diaphragm is completely flat all the way around. You emit the voice while pushing out wards. We must continue to make the note "travel" until the end. For example when I emit an "a" it is not only one a'" but millions of "a's'" like machine gun fire.

[Alfredo Kraus sings the high D b mol (La Fille du Régiment Paris 1986)

Q: Maestro, I would like to ask you about vocal agility. There are many singers with light voices that should have no problems with it, but instead they have many difficulties. What would you advise them to do?

AK: It is a question of practice. You must make sure that every note is part of a single flow and are all sung legato without that awful "ha-ha-ha" sound. We Latins have the habit of adding a sort of "h" before each note. It is quite dangerous as with this system we risk loosing the sustainment of the sound. The secret for singing well is that of singing legato. This will also give you the agility needed.

Q: Without discussing the specific virtues of your colleagues, I would like to ask wou what the difference is between the open method of singing (like Di Stefano) and the rounded method (like Bergonzi)?

AK: I cannot talk about singing methods. For me there exists only one method for singing, only one technique. You must pardon my presumption, but I retain that the correct technique is the one use myself. The fact that anyone manages to sing well because of their gifts does not mean anything. As I said before there are the so called “iron voices”, that can survive any sort of treatment. You must know how to listen accurately: hear if a "round" voice can really resolve the high notes, or if a voice placed in the throat can resolve them at all. Most listeners know nothing of these terms: they only want to listen to a beautiful voice, especially one that screams a lot, and everything is fine. It's a question of making do.

Q: You mean as in the case of some much publicized voices?

AK: Exactly!

Q: Can you explain how to perform the mezzavoce?

AK: This is one of the many contradictions of singing. To diminish the sound we must increase the

pressure and decrease the volume, that is : we must compress the diaphragm further while reducing the weight of the sound, lifting it ever higher and lightening it. This is not easy. We cannot resolve this problem in five minutes. However it is the only way to reduce the sound, keeping the same position, without having to use any falsetto. The facial muscles are very helpful in this as well. We must train them to be elastic and mobile.

Q: When you talk about the sustainment of the voice, you make a vertical gesture. How can the widening of the ribs horizontally have anything to do with this vertical pressure?

AK: Of course singing is full of these contradictions. If I breathe pulling my stomach in, the diaphragm could lose tension. How could I sustain the voice then?

Q: So we must keep a constant pressure, pushing outwards along the whole circumference of our abdomen?

AK: That's right. On all sides. Thus the diaphragm remains as tense as possible.

Q: Can you explain yourself better please?

AK: The diaphragm is an elastic membrane. When it is relaxed, in its normal position, it is not completely horizontal. If I keep it horizontal during expiration, by pushing outwards, I can support the column of air needed to sing. Otherwise where could I sustain it to be able to project it forwards? Take a trampoline artist, for example, from whence does be project himself when he jumps ? He is sustained by something that resists his pressure, then he jumps. Have you ever watched a small baby crying naked on a bed? What does he move? The ribs. And where does he sustain the sound ? In his facial mask. You can be sure that the baby will never lose his voice. The parents will jump out of the window from desperation, but the baby will cry for days on end without losing voice. This happens because he is using a physiologically perfect technique. He breathes naturally, widening the ribs to extend the diaphragm and projects the column of air into the facial amplifiers. I am afraid that I cannot be more understandable than that.