The Art of Piano Singing

By Alexander Kipnis

In my long career I have always noticed that those singers who had the desire to sing piano or mezza voce have been able to do so only gradually. We all know very well that to many singers soft singing seems a waste of time. One must remember that the singer who was born with a lyrical quality of voice will achieve the goal much more readily than the one whom nature endowed with a more heroic and heavy voice.

In addition, there are many great singers who have the talent, the ability, and the knowledge to sing and express themselves in piano singing (as I choose to call it), but very frequently these same singers are prevented from doing so because the character of the music which they sing does not give them the opportunity to show what they really can do with their voices. Very often, also, fine artists are prevented from singing piano by a certain public which dislikes this sort of “soft singing.” They would rather consider long, high, and strong notes, accompanied by big portamenti up and down with huge sighs after each tone, as the real bel canto.

I remember vividly a tea given by an outstanding singing teacher in New York many years ago. A group of the most prominent of the great singers of the “golden era” were present, and among them was the unforgettable and incomparable Titta Ruffo. I was then a young man, starting my career with the Chicago Civic Opera company. Ruffo, to whom I had just been introduced, asked me to sing something. I sang a lyrical, sentimental Russian folk song, accompanied myself at the piano with a few chords. When I finished Ruffo, who had been standing next to the piano, looked at me for awhile, then turned and began to speak to the host and his other colleagues, saying:

“This man sings exactly as I was taught to sing and always wanted to. But, unfortunately my manager prevented me from doing so. Being advertised as the possessor of one of the greatest baritone voices of the century, I had to comply with the wishes of the public who expected in every phrase to hear my full volume. One day when I realized my fame as a great artist was established thoroughly enough, I decided to sing the way I was taught and as I had longed to. During a performance of Rigoletto that night I sang the great monologue `Cortigiani,’ concluding the aria with a most beautiful cantabile D flat on an exquisite pianissimo.

“But instead of the usual ovation I had expected, only a few hands started to applaud. I was greatly surprised! After the act my manager came to my dressing room with a very worried expression and asked me, `Ruffo, are you sick? What happened to you? The audience is terribly disappointed with your singing tonight!’ When I answered, `No, I'm not sick, this is the way I was told to sing and how I always dreamed of singing,’ my manager said, ‘If you want to ruin your career and lose your popularity with the audience, just go on singing like that. But if you wish to continue your triumphs as the great Ruffo, give more brilliance, more volume, hold your notes long.’ And that's how I was prevented from singing piano!”

The gift of piano or mezzo voce singing is not always given to the child in his cradle. The atmosphere and environment in which the future singer grows up will greatly influence his choice of music and his gift for dramatic or lyrical type of singing. It might also change to a degree, the natural qualities of his voice.

It was always interesting for me to observe that young singers of different nationalities have taken on the characteristics of the music of the countries where they lived and studied. An example: Many German singers, while studying in Italy, have often acquired a real bel canto although their physical inclination tends towards a different type of singing; and so Hungarians, Russians, and Czechoslovakians, who had their vocal education in Germany, have achieved great prominence in the field of the German classical and romantic singing, such as Bach, Mozart, Haydn, and above all, Lieder singing. I stress this example as proof of the strength of environment.

Realizing that the most outstanding vocal music lies in its lyrical quality, I always tried, while studying opera or songs, to stress this very lyricism. Even in such dramatic operatic parts as Wotan, Hagen, Tristan, Siegfried, Otello, there is so much lyrical singing which must be lovingly considered.

Judging from books and stories of the past about singers and singing in general, there was always a search for the really true art of piano singing. Only a few have been able to achieve this goal of completely expressive mezza voce. In European countries there has always been a difference in the meaning of the terms, “piano singing” and “soft singing.” “Soft singing” is not piano singing; there's only half voice production, while “piano singing” is an expressive soft singing. These differences can really only be illustrated by the actual sounds.

Great singers of the past centuries would also be considered great in these times, were it not that we might think them guilty of attempting to imitate orchestral instruments. This is due largely to the music they had to perform, those arias and songs with the long coloratura passages, cadenzas, trills, and especially sustained high and brilliant notes. Now, since the romantic era we are striving to adapt lyrical expressiveness of songs (such as those of Schumann, Schubert, Wolf, Duparc, Fauré, and so on) to the lyrical content of the words of such masters. It is impossible that an accomplished singer of our time would not be able to impress many of the great singers of the past because of their inability to perform the aforementioned brilliant coloratura passages and cadenzas.

The genius of a creative musician has, of course, a great deal to do with the method of vocal production of the period of that musician. For instance, we know that Mozart, Bellini, and Rossini composed a great number of their operas with specific singers in mind. We also know that Wagner and Strauss, as well as the French expressionists, have created music to which a whole new generation of singers had to adapt themselves in order to be able to do it justice. For instance, it was quite a long period of the time in Germany when hardly any vocal training was necessary for an operatic career. A large man or woman with a big voice could easily have been an ideal Siegfried or Brünnhilde. A whole generation of singers resulted from this period, whose accomplishments consisted of little more than the ability to sing Wagner (one exception, it might be stated, was Lilli Lehmann). We still have dozens of outstanding so-called Wagnerian singers who would be greatly bewildered if they had to sing a part in a work by Mozart, Handel, or Verdi.

Wagner has created this generation of shouting singers. I doubt whether this was his intention, however, for in his many operas there is so much lyrical music which could and should be sung with the most exquisite lyrical qualities. This is true even of such dramatic parts as Siegfried, Tristan, Sieglinde, Wotan, Hans Sachs, and Gurnemanz. Unfortunately, Wagner is very often misunderstood in this regard. I received my greatest impression of true Wagnerian singing at a performance of Tristan in the Berlin State Opera. Mr. Joseph Mann, a Polish tenor, sang the title role with such lyrical quality as to move the audience deeply and which would have easily done justice to the part of Rodolfo in La Bohème.

As I pointed out, there is hardly a singer who intentionally shouts when he sings, or who constantly sings forte. He does so because he cannot produce a real singing piano tone. We also know that there are a great many singers who can only sing softly or who can croon their melodies. This is due to a lack of resonance – an inability to produce an expressive forte. The latter (the crooner type) has at his disposal the microphone as a means of escape. Unfortunately for the former type, no instrument has been invented which could transform a shouting tone into a beautiful piano tone.

The question remains: how does one produce an expressive piano in singing? The procedure from the physical standpoint is very simple: inhale only half of your lung capacity; transfer the air into your diaphragm. When the diaphragm muscle takes control of the air, send the air column as gently and softly as possible up to the larynx. Begin to sing with a tone of the middle register, starting with an “h” before the vowel “a” or “o” (“ha” or “ho”); increase the sound up to a mezzo forte, and then slowly decrease the same tone to a pianissimo.

Continue the same exercise in chromatic notes up to the point where the singer can still produce a well sounding tone. The throat must always be kept open, and the tone should be concentrated in the “mask” of the face and the tone should always touch the lips. The volume decrease should be gradual and slow so that the ear cannot perceive when the tone stops. At this moment the head tone or the so-called falsetto takes over and forms a bridge between the chest tone and a falsetto. The change from a full chest tone to a pianissimo falsetto must be executed without any break in order that the sound should appear to be as one unit. The change into a falsetto applies only to men, however; a woman's voice doesn't have the break between chest and head tones unless the singer is a low contralto.

I would like here to say a few words about falsetto singing. In several countries it is considered a sort of fake singing. This is partly true, but it is only so if the performer cannot bring out the same tone with full resonance and brilliance. But as a means of diminishing a high note from a fortissimo into the softest pianissimo, I consider a falsetto not only legal but very beautiful and effective. For example, how great would the effect be if Radames in his first aria, “Celeste Aida,” could diminish the high B flat into a real pianissimo as Verdi expressly intended it.

Or, as in Schumann's “Mondnacht,” during all the repeated passages such as:

[Kipnis must have sung an excerpt here.]

How enchanting it sounds to hear all those E flats sung with the pure head tone. As a third example of the use of falsetto, take the famous “Verschwiegene Liebe” by Hugo Wolf. In this one passage:

[Kipnis must have sung an excerpt here.]

If the singer cannot jump to the D sharp with a clear falsetto tone, then the whole effect of the song is lost. I would therefore say that the so-called hated and condemned falsetto singing has a definite place in the technique of the male performer of Lieder and songs, as well as in operatic scenes and arias.

The physical explanation and descriptions are comparatively simple, but the actual production is far more complicated. As it is known, most knowledge of singing can be learned only through imitation. A singer can only acquire the right knowledge of piano tone production by choosing a teacher who will be in a position to demonstrate and correct. One legato phrase, expertly demonstrated by a good teacher or singer would do more to clarify the general idea about piano singing than a whole chapter scientifically written on the same subject. And so my advice to young hopeful singers would be to select a teacher who himself is able to sing who can immediately correct and demonstrate.

The art of singing is very abstract. One can read volumes about it and still be very vague as to its accomplishment. It's not like harmony or counterpoint where there are fixed rules to rely on. There will always be some singers with good voices seeking the famous, beautiful piano tone and rarely finding it. On the other hand many young singers performed miracles in piano singing and crooning. We have to realize that nature has a great deal to do with the ability to produce lyrical-dramatic singing. Very seldom can we expect the same voice to deliver a Siegfried and a Rodolfo, a Wotan and a Renato, or a Hagen and a Sarastro. Even though a singer may have the best possible technique, if nature has endowed him with the dramatic voice you will not be able to do full justice to an outspoken lyrical part. Technique will help, but it cannot replace nature.

It is for this reason that I would advise young singers to remain within the realms of their own vocal equipment as soon as their type of voice has been established. Many heartaches and pitfalls can thus be avoided. But even a dramatic singer should be able to conquer the art of piano singing sufficiently to render effective the type of role for which he is best suited.