

BREATHING TECHNIQUES IN THE PARIS SINGING TREATISE (*MÉTHODE DE CHANT*, PARIS, 1803)

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SUMMARY. This article tries to identify the breathing techniques proposed in the Paris Singing treatise, published in 1803. The method gives us the description of the respiratory movement practiced by singers before the institutionalization of knowledge according to scientific research. The aim of the French school was to produce a natural tone and to deliver beauty in the act of singing without physical limitations or excesses imposed on the body or voice. We found that the French school aims to respect the length of the sentences and this to the detriment of the quality of the sound emitted. Regarding the physiology of breathing, the method uses analogies with images that allow singers to imagine what is “hidden” in their body, and explain the functioning of different parts, according to the “tasks” assigned to them. The teachers of this method suggest to the practitioner not to think about breathing and uses the term natural breathing, as there is no difference between the breath needed to sing and the breath needed to speak. Their abstraction is that the performer does not think about breathing while speaking, so there is no need for a breathing-oriented thinking process even during singing

Keywords: French singing school, natural breathing.

During the Baroque period, France began to develop a national style, but, as history shows, the influence of Italy was dominant in this era and also in France the singing techniques were approached by adopting methods similar to those employed in Italy. The aim of the French school was to produce a natural tone and to deliver beauty in the act of singing without physical limitations or excesses imposed on the body or voice. Authors such as Rameau, Mengozzi and Blanchet wrote about the Italian

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style version of the French school, the French being more concerned with the pronunciation and the correct placement of the tongue during singing. The general style was more controlled and “moderation was always maintained”² in the French style.

“Méthode de chant du Conservatoire de Musique” treatise was published in 1803, as a result of a collective collaboration, the method being written by a commission composed by: Louis-Augustin Richer (1740-1818), Pierre Garat (1762-1823), François-Joseph Gossec (1734-1829), Etienne-Nicolas Méhul (1763-1817), Pierre-Louis Guinguené (1748-1816), Honoré Langlé (1741-1807), Charles-Henri Plantade (1764-1839), Louis-Joseph Guichard (1752-1829), Luigi Cherubini (1760-1842) and Bernardo Mengozzi (1758-1800).

The first part which “on the mechanism of the voice” is divided into seven chapters:

- I. About the voice
- II. Breath
- III. Sound emission
- IV. Voice division
- V. Registers of different voices
- VI. The limits of different male voices. The limits of women's voices.
- VII. About children's mutism [our translation].

The first part of the method is dedicated to the mechanism of the voice, which the authors define “the voice is the organ of speech and singing”³ and add: “the philosophical definition of this organ would not be useful in the plan of a method of singing; but, in order to understand the various precepts to be stated there, it is necessary to establish the main notions of the means which contribute to the action of the voice”⁴ [our translation]. This definition of “philosophical” uses the term according to contemporary dictionaries, where the term “philosophical” refers to “science in general”. Nowadays we would be surprised if we did not consider the scientific approach useful in a method of singing, but in 1803 this was not taken as such.

² Miller, Richard. *National Schools of Singing: English, French, German, and Italian Techniques of Singing Revisited*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2002, p. 192.

³ Richer et al., 1803, p. 11

⁴ „La définition philosophique de cet organe n’entrerait pas utilement dans le plan d’une Méthode de Chant; mais, pour l’intelligence des différents préceptes qui doivent y être énoncés, il est nécessaire d’établir les notions principales des moyens qui contribuent à l’action de la voix” – Richer et al., 1803, p. 1.

In its first part, the method gives us a list in the form of an anatomical inventory, apparently in disarray. “In addition to the palate, tongue, teeth and lips, which are useful for the mechanism of the voice, several parts, such as the lungs, trachea-artery, larynx, frontal sinuses, maxillary sinuses, nostrils, agree with its formation or modification”⁵. Nowadays we practice another paradigm of the production of vocal sound that has its source in respiration, but in 1803, the voice seemed primarily associated with the mouth and the sensations perceived in it, we shall recall that the laryngoscope was not yet invented and that singers had no other frame of reference than their world of sensations and imagination.

Even if the Method devotes seven pages to the “vocal mechanism”, it seems that the authors do not see the usefulness of having physiological or anatomical knowledge about the entire vocal apparatus. Chapter II of the method is dedicated to breathing, with an approach not necessarily common, breathing being defined as an “action of the lungs to attract and repel air”. This action is divided into two alternating movements, aspiration, and expiration. “In aspiration, (inspiration), the lungs expand to bring outside air into the chest; and in expiration, they collapse to reveal it”⁶. In the following, the method gives us the description of the respiratory movement practiced by singers before the institutionalization of knowledge according to scientific research. Thus, the authors of the method note the following “it should be noted that the act of breathing to sing differs somewhat from the act of breathing for speaking. When we breathe to speak or to simply renew the air in the lungs, the first movement is that of inspiration, then the belly swells and its upper part protrudes slightly; then it sags, and it is the second movement that of expiration: that occurs; these two movements take place slowly, when the body is in its natural state. On the contrary, in the act of breathing to sing, while inhaling, it is necessary to flatten the abdomen and make it rise quickly, by swelling and pushing the chest. About the act of expiration, the belly should return very slowly to its natural state and the chest sinks as it goes, in order to preserve and save, as long as possible, the air that has been introduced into the lungs; which should be allowed to come out only slowly and without shaking the chest; it has to flow, so to speak”⁷. [our translation]

⁵ „Outre le Palais, la Langue, les Dents et les Lèvres, qui sont utiles au mécanisme de la voix, Plusieurs parties telles que les Poumons, la Trachée-Artère, le Larynx, les Sinus Frontaux, les Sinus Maxillaires, les Fosses Nasales, concourent à sa formation ou à sa modification.” – Richer et al., 1803, p. 20

⁶ Ibidem, p. 32

⁷ „Il faut observer que l'action de respirer pour chanter, diffère en quelque chose de la respiration pour parler. Quand on respire pour parler, ou pour renouveler simplement l'air des poumons, le premier mouvement est celui de l'aspiration, alors le ventre se gonfle et sa partie

Breathing to sing is thus considered a specialized movement, this means that, for the singer, breathing is not a “natural” movement not a cultural habit, but an art (artifice), according to customs and principles. The description of the inspiratory movement can be considered bizarre compared to our current practices: “flatten the abdomen and make it rise quickly, by swelling and pushing the chest forward”⁸. In pursuing to understand this description, we questioned the use of terms such as “belly”. Indeed, the “region of the body extending from the waist to the thighs” could have been perceived differently in 1803 and could designate a narrower region of the body than today. Therefore, the inspiration would involve an abdominal retraction movement to support a lifting and an expanding movement in the chest. As the authors continue, the breath “to sing” it has two alternatives: “deep breathing” and “half breathing”, a division that may echo the concepts and the works of Italian masters, in relation to the terms “respiro” and “mezzo respiro”. “Therefore, there is a so-called 'rigorous breathing' that we can call great breathing and another that we can call half breathing without considering the one that can be taken in silence (silence). Great inspiration does not have place only after the end of the sentence (musical); Half breathing is allowed, on the intermediate rest of the same phrase, only for the thorax with reduced capacity”⁹.

We find here that, unlike the Italian school, the French school would be under the pressure to respect the length of the sentences or phrases, even if they are very long, and this to the detriment of the quality of the sound emitted. We note that the method specifies that half breathing is considered a “weakness”, so that breathing is associated with the effort not to cut the sentence. Regarding the physiology of breathing, the method uses analogies with images that allow singers to imagine what is “hidden” in their body, and explain the functioning of different parts, according to

supérieure s'avance un peu; ensuite il s'affaisse, c'est le second mouvement, celui de l'expiration: ces deux mouvements s'opèrent lentement, lorsque le corps est dans son état naturel. Au contraire, dans l'action de respirer pour chanter, en aspirant, il faut aplatir le ventre et le faire remonter avec promptitude, en gonflant et avançant la poitrine. Dans l'expiration, le ventre doit revenir fort lentement à son état naturel et la poitrine s'abaisse à mesure, à fin de conserver et de ménager, le plus longtemps possible, l'air que l'on a introduit dans les poumons; on ne doit le laisser échapper qu'avec lenteur, et sans donner de secousses à la poitrine; il faut pour ainsi dire qu'il s'écoule” – Richer et al., 1803, p. 3.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 4.

⁹ „Il est donc une Respiration de rigueur qu'on peut nommer GRANDE RESPIRATION, et une autre qu'on peut appeler DEMI RESPIRATION sans compter celle qu'on peut prendre sur tous les silences. La Grande respiration n'a lieu qu'après la Conclusion de la Phrase; la Demi Respiration n'est permise, sur le repos intermédiaire de la même Phrase, qu'en faveur des poitrines de capacité faible”, ibidem, p. 60.

the “tasks” assigned to them. For example, the movement of the lungs is compared to a “bellows” and the epiglottis will be compared to an “ivy leaf”¹⁰.

Because this article discusses only the modalities used for the punctual explanation of the principles of the artistic breathing being used at the beginning of the 19th century, and of the breathing training, in our research we realized that the Method mentions the breathing exercises only in a footnote. In fact, in Chapter II, page 2, note 1, the authors state: “It must be strongly recommended that students focus on breathing, because it is everything for singing. We urge them to practice every day, even without singing, to breathe and to hold their breath as much as they can, following exactly the way we indicate in this article, in relation to the act of breathing to sing. This exercise should be done in moderation, although it should not be neglected. A singer who has not exercised his breath will be forced to breathe often; but then his means will soon be exhausted, and his voice will sound only in faint and hesitant sounds”¹¹. [our translation]

If breathing is essential, why include only a discreet recommendation? In other words, does the mention at the bottom of the page indicate something more than its obvious content? But, the obvious recommendation, repeated several times during the method, is that the student “knowing how to breathe” will sing well later, so breathing well is an essential acquisition, but is it separated from the emission of sound or not? As we further studied the Method, there is no note regarding this issue anywhere in the text. At the same time, we are witnessing the warning against the “misuse” of the singing instrument because, according to the authors, the “exceptional” breathing “destroys the strength of the chest” and the one who “contracts” this “defect” “does not play (sing) much”¹².

By comparison, the instructions for breathing seem much stricter in France than in Italy, because, for example, the method prohibits breathing within the range: “While doing this scale, we will not breathe after each note... () ... The student will breathe only after climbing to the highest sound ... so that you can sing the same scale in one breath. So, he will stay on each note as long as necessary to ensure the correct intonation and will

¹⁰ Richer et al., 1803, p. 16

¹¹ „On ne saurait trop recommander aux élèves de s’occuper de la respiration; elle est tout pour le chant. Nous les engageons à s’exercer tous les jours, même sans chanter, à prendre et retenir aussi longtemps qu’ils le pourront la respiration, en suivant exactement la manière que nous indiquons dans cet article, relativement à l’action de respirer pour chanter. Il faut qu’ils se livrent à cet exercice avec modération quoique pourtant il ne faille pas le négliger. Un chanteur qui n’aura pas exercé la respiration, sera forcé de respirer souvent; mais alors ses moyens seront bientôt épuisés, et sa voix ne fera plus entendre que des sons faibles et vacillans.”, *ibidem*, 1803, cap II., p. 2.

¹² *Ibidem*, 1803, p. 2.

press the movement while sparing his breath”¹³. James Stark in his book on bel canto schools’ notes: “French song does not allow you to breathe in the middle of a word; it even requires, as far as possible, breathing only at the end or middle of the sentence. If, by chance, someone was forced to suspend the meaning by breathing, then it should be done with great skill and in an almost insensitive manner, so that the listener does not notice it. The Italian, on the contrary, takes much more care of the musical phrase than he puts severity in his breathing. Therefore, in certain circumstances, the breathes are possible even in the middle of a word, especially at the point d’orgue; but this is only tolerated¹⁴”.

In conclusion, the French method published in 1803, which brings together a few authors and pedagogues of the time, further confirms that the relationship with respiration is quite different in France and Italy. William Shakespeare also refers to the French formula of breathing noting: “Most authors who mention breathing in connection with singing give instructions to breathe, warning the singer against breathing in the middle of a word or phrase”¹⁵. Richard Miller, analyzing the way in which breathing is approached by French pedagogues, thinks that “less attention is directed to the conscious management of respiration in the French school than in any other”. “Students are urged to maintain a good posture and relax, but more specific procedures are rarely directed at them. A discussion of diaphragmatic or costal action is occasionally encountered, but no systematic scheme of conscious breathing control is typical. For the most part, the French school is dedicated to the best approach to managing respiration described as natural breathing”¹⁶. The concept of breathing in the French school is based on the idea of natural breathing, considering that breathing is a reflex act: an unconscious, spontaneous activity that does not involve any voluntary control.

Based on this idea, the teachers of this method suggest to the practitioner (singer, actor, student) not to think about breathing. You should be in a state of relaxation like drowsiness. According to Jean-Philippe Rameau: “the singer’s breathing is natural and should not be strained, in addition, the breathing needed to sing does not require more attention compared to any other physical activity of a healthy person”¹⁷. In the French school, breathing management is a natural process.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 114.

¹⁴ Stark, James, *Bel Canto: A History of Vocal Pedagogy*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999, p. 66.

¹⁵ Shakespeare, William, *The art of singing*, 1921, p. 72.

¹⁶ Miller, Richard, *National Schools of Singing: English, French, German, and Italian Techniques of Singing Revisited*, Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1997, p. 105.

¹⁷ Rameau, Jean-Philippe, *Code de la Musique*, New York: Broude Brothers, 1760, p. 81.

The term natural breathing is used by a group of teachers with theoretical concerns, they assumed that there is no difference between the breath needed to sing and the breath needed to speak. Their abstraction is that the performer does not think about breathing while speaking, so there is no need for a breathing-oriented thinking process even during singing, being confident, as mentioned above, that phrasing will be dictated by breath control.

The posture of the body must be a natural position, the chest must be raised and then extended to inhale “correctly”, the inspiration must be unconscious as in conversation. Another aspect of breathing is that holding the breath while singing must be deprived of tension. “Unnatural breathing and support techniques - disrupt the path of nature”¹⁸. The air that is expelled from the lungs must be light and unrestrained, not forced because it would create tension. Central to the approach to the French school of music pedagogy remains the idea of the absence of unnecessary tension and conscious effort. We can find a “reincarnation” of these hypotheses and rudiments in the Patsy Rodenburg method because she also proposes a similar system for dosing the breath for actors in the theater, starting from an assessment of the extension of the phrase or thought to be said.

“The greater the feeling, the longer the thought, the greater the space for action, the greater the breath [required] to fill all three,” given this, she notes that an actor needs an “organic breath... which is flexible and a support system”¹⁹.

Teachers who are followers of natural breathing, disagree with a more intense muscular activity from the mechanisms of respiration during singing, so observes Richard Miller when analyzing the French school of singing “You do not have to think about breathing when you speak, so do not think about that when you sing”²⁰.

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¹⁸ Berard, Jean Antoine, *L'Art du Chant*, A Facsimile of the 1755, Paris ed. N.Y.: Bronde Brothers, 1755, p. 27.

¹⁹ Rodenburg, Patsy. *The Actor Speaks*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, p. 19.

²⁰ Miller, Richard, op. cit., p.199.

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