

May 2008

On Voice and Spirit

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Recommended Citation

Costik, Michael (2008) "On Voice and Spirit," *Verbum*: Vol. 5: Iss. 2, Article 12.
Available at: <http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum/vol5/iss2/12>

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"This quote always struck me very powerfully. "The spirit nourishes within." Is there a separation of voice from our spiritual being? Over the past several months I have given a lot of thought to the nature of music, singing, and voice. As a student of music, I frequently thought that my training did not solely pertain to singing, but I rarely reflected on this at. Now, I realize that I was being formed in virtues that are not separate from the desire for integrity. I believe that music itself is a very compelling topic that is under-discussed philosophically and theologically, and the discussion of voice is important to our nature, the nature of music, and the Logos, among other things. With that in mind, much of what I will discuss is about singing, but I do not mean for any of this to apply to only the singing voice. As I ponder the following topics, I realize that a much longer work may be emerging. However, the following essay offers a bit of reflection on how I am beginning to visualize the total nature of the human voice, singing, and spiritual growth."



From Our Guest Essayist

On Voice and Spirit

Transcendent Voice and Technical Voice

*But the voice, fruit of a superior experience
linked to humankind's divine nature, from which inspiration flows,
is melodic breath, spirit. "Spiritus intus alit":
it breathes in the vibration and transfigures it.*

- Giacomo Lauri-Volpi

This quote always struck me very powerfully. "The spirit nourishes within." Is there a separation of voice from our spiritual being? Over the past several months I have given a lot of thought to the nature of music, singing, and voice. As a student of music, I frequently thought that my training did not solely pertain to singing, but I rarely reflected on this at. Now, I realize that I was being formed in virtues that are not separate from the desire for integrity. I believe that music itself is a very compelling topic that is under-discussed philosophically and theologically, and the discussion of voice is important to our nature, the nature of music, and the *Logos*, among other things. With that in mind, much of what I will discuss is about singing, but I do not mean for any of this to apply to only the singing voice. As I ponder the following topics, I realize that a much longer work may be emerging. However, the following essay offers a bit of reflection on how I

am beginning to visualize the total nature of the human voice, singing, and spiritual growth.

Voice as the Human Sound

What is it about the human voice that makes it so powerful? Why are some as quick to describe voice as animal and also divine? For example, it has been stated that when one sings well, one sings with God's voice. I like that, but I don't agree. Nor do I agree that voice is animal – "Just let go and roar." I believe that voice is human, and that it is good to be human. I like the spirit of both of the above sayings, but only metaphorically. These are disastrous ideas when taken into our identities because they are ideas contrary to our human nature. A human spirit and a human voice only grow where planted. We are human, therefore we need to bloom from the roots of our humanity and reach for divinity in the fullness of our humanness. It does me no good, ultimately, to believe that God will "take over" in song and help me with the high notes. God will however grant me sufficient grace to be able to get there, not alone, but with my perseverance. Great singing is human and amazing; it is also very rare. And there is a lot of space between mountain peaks. We stand on earth looking up naturally wishing to climb. Why? Because we are human. "And God saw that it was good."

What singers do is cry out. But, why do human beings cry out? For everything! Joy, sadness, rage, fear, hatred, love, mercy, and on and on! We cry out for all reasons. This cry of *ordinary voice* (simple phonation), combined with the technicality of language (and rhythm, pitch, etc) and colored by emotion

is the beginning of the *transcendent voice*. Singers and dramatic actors cry out to tell a story. The transcendent voice takes on both the ordinary and technical and adds an element of impetus that we call emotion. Emotions represent the *foundation of music* (a characteristic that music may contain) that constitutes expression. In this it expresses a reason for the particular statement, song, etc. In other words, the transcendent voice tells us why, as the technical tells us how, or in what form. It gives us the first glimpse of awe inspiring possibilities that were undreamed of before. However, this voice must be tempered by the technical voice. Emotions must be managed. It is not a virtue to be constantly released into emotionalism. Don't most of us learn this when very young? Emotions color a voice, but are never given to the control of voice. Let the melody help with this.

Transcendent Voice and Melodic Breath – Spiritual Voice

If crying out is the beginning of ordinary voice, then crying out with the melodic breath (music) is the end of it. That's a terrible way to describe it because the terms "beginning and end" are absolutely wrong to describe what happens here. What happens here is what Lauri-Volpi describes in these words:

[Human singing] is the reflection of a spiritual vibration.

Without the melodic breath this does not happen in its fullness. Singing is the highest and most complicated form of voice. Operatic singing is the most complicated of ways to sing because it is physiologically identical to a cry and requires the most studied technique. Even so, all voice that uses melodic breath is Spiritual Voice regardless of style. We should distinguish here that I mean

“Spiritual Voice” as it applies to the vibration of vocal chords, not in the actual voice of the spirit, which could take on many forms. Spiritual voice is co-created by the Spirit and by the singer. This is because of the eternal nature of melody and music. Sufficient to our purpose is my supposition that music is a powerful “vibrative” entity inextricable from God’s own nature. When infused with voice, it takes on a power that is unusual and somewhat difficult to describe. But we only need to witness or observe response to great singing to realize this.

There is, however, correspondence between technical voice (phonation with any intellectual impetus) and spiritual voice. The technical voice can be overdone. An opera singer possessed with *how* to sing cannot use the spiritual voice. His or her singing may be impressive, but will lack that coordination with Eternity that transcendence brings. Likewise, an uneducated singer is one not worth hearing either, because the melodic breath has nothing to connect with. Thus, anyone who uses the spiritual voice, whose voice carries with it something indescribable or eternal, must by definition also be using the technical voice. Luciano Pavarotti didn’t read music, but his voice was very spiritually connected. Therefore, his technicality was enough for him. For what God had asked of that man, he was sufficiently technical. That is not to say that we ever rest on our laurels. No, we must continue developing in all of our life domains: Spiritual, Physical, Intellectual, Emotional, and Social as well as Vocal, but we must not seek to give everyone the same burden, for God certainly has not.

Final Thought - Liberation

It is important to consider that this connection between voice and spirit is actually rather profound. In an age when we speak to each other often without voice it is good to be reminded of this very important gift. Interestingly, this would have seemed inconceivable a generation ago. Technology was sending our voices all over the world by telephone, but that written language would increase as a form of communication probably would have seemed unlikely. At any rate, the voices of our bodies and our spirits are not disconnected, and should therefore be used as much as possible in communication. There is something about the immediacy of voice and its identification with the person speaking that is very powerful. And when infused with melodic breath it becomes almost overwhelmingly so.

This understanding of the voice has given me vocal liberation and has resulted in a voice more beautiful and free than any that I could have fabricated on my own. Spiritually, aren't these virtues similarly sought after? I suppose, in a very important sense, that it involves a surrender of our will to the divine Will to accomplish either. What "system of thought" could I develop that could compare to the one that already lies outside my control? Complete and superior to my imagination is a way of communication and expression that I cannot fathom. Interestingly, I find in this realization that words are useless. I know that I will reflect and develop these ideas for many years to come, but for now the knowledge of allowing this surrender is enough to help me remove impediments, and therefore grow in voice and spirit.

Michael Costik