

THE AMERICAN SPEAKING VOICE

By Francis Rogers



VICTOR MAUREL, the greatest acting singer this country has known, once wrote to a Parisian journal of seeing Richard Mansfield play the character part of "Prince Karl," and praised, in especial, the facility and verisimilitude with which Mansfield imitated with his voice different musical instruments and the voices of other people. The French artist described the somewhat nasal timbre of Mansfield's natural voice as being more or less typical of the American speaking voice in general, and held this fundamental quality to indicate the capacity for vocal development that is so notable among our singers in the operatic world to-day. But foreign observers, as a rule, have been much less laudatory in their comments on the American voice and have discovered in it a twang and a strenuous note distressing both to ears and to sensibilities. We, on our side, have accepted these strictures with meekness, admitting their justness and deploring disappointedly our own vocal shortcomings, but making little or no attempt to better a remediable situation.

Some of these critics have maintained that, owing to our abominably changeable climate, we are all, in some degree, sufferers from catarrh, so that our national nose is in a chronic state of "no thoroughfare"—hence our high-pitched and nasal tones. This explanation is hardly to be taken seriously, and I, for one, do not believe that we are a more catarrhal people than are the inhabitants of any other country within the north temperate zone. Our American winters, so full of bright sunshine and bracing air, are, despite the sudden changes in temperature and the occasional severe storms, quite as healthful, I am sure, as the dank, sunless winters of London, Paris, Milan, and Berlin.

The American voice is not inherently (or catarrhally) nasal or unmusical, but it is certainly crude and uncultivated. Its disagreeable qualities are due to our generally

slovenly utterance and to our neglect of the mere technique of speech. Under cultivation our voices are as beautiful as any. Our best actors, a few public speakers like W. J. Bryan and President Eliot, and our singers in every opera-giving country furnish ample proof of this assertion. As a people, we are lamentably careless in our speech. Our restless, hasty lives drive from our minds the impulse for self-culture that would lead us to train intelligently the mechanism of vocal expression.

"Her voice was ever soft, gentle, and low,—an excellent thing in woman"—because the tones of the voice betokened the lovely qualities of tenderness, unselfishness, and humility. No organ of the body is more truly indicative of character and mental states than is the voice. A melodious voice attracts us; a strident voice repels us. A strain of sentiment creeps into our voice, and our hearers sense at once the feeling behind it. A shadow in the voice, and instinct straightway guesses the lurking insincerity or falsehood. A friend of mine maintains that he can read character correctly at the first hearing of a voice. What persuasive power lies in a noble, mellifluous utterance! Bryan's sonorous, fluent tones are among his most effective oratorical weapons.

The physical conformation of the throat and head has much to do with the power and quality of the voice, but in this matter psychology plays quite as influential a part as physiology. If we are a hasty, strenuous, and materialistic people, our voices will inevitably tell the story, and not till we have mended our tense, eager, self-seeking ways shall we learn to speak altogether melodiously.

But it is not my intention here to preach the simple life. I wish only to enter a plea for a greater attention to the purely physical aspects of the question. The study of voice production, whether for singing or for speaking, may, in a general way, be divided into two parts. One concerns itself with the column of air, the base of which rests

upon the diaphragm, and which passes through the larynx and vocal cords into the resonating cavities of the head; the other deals with the processes of articulation and pronunciation, which take place entirely in the mouth. The column of air is the tone itself in the rough; the mouth, tongue, and lips mould it into the vowels and consonants requisite for the formation of intelligible speech.

The foundation of good voice production is good breathing, and nature will attend to this, if we give it half a chance. If we stand or sit erect, without stiffness, but with our backbone straight from its base to the neck, the lungs will act freely and correctly. Over the vocal cords we have no direct conscious control, and the less we try to do with the throat, the better will be the tones we utter. The throat should always be free from any tightness whatsoever. Any infringement of this law impairs infallibly the beauty of the tone. The driving power of the vocal machinery comes from the base of the column of air, and it is in that region only that muscular effort is permissible.

After the tone reaches the mouth the jaw, tongue, and lips shape it into either a vowel or a consonant sound. When we sigh we breathe out softly the vowel *u* (as in *up*). When we laugh we aspirate the vowel *a* and say "Ha! Ha!" When we hum we vocalize the consonant *m*. These are all spontaneous utterances that we do not need to be taught, but in the study of a complicated and highly developed language like English we must learn to form consciously and correctly the many vowel and consonant sounds. A deaf child may be taught to speak by a system known as "visible speech," by means of which, under the guidance of the eye alone, the tongue, lips, and jaw are trained to assume the correct positions for the production of the desired sounds. By this system it is possible to correct defects of utterance and crudities of accent in all languages. There is practically no difference in accent or inflection between the best American and the best English actors, and this is because both have trained themselves out of the dialectic and provincial peculiarities with which their speech may originally have been afflicted, and now speak on a higher level of excellence which is common to both countries.

An element of capital importance in determining the general character of national utterance is, of course, language, and the voice itself is radically affected by the qualities and defects of the mother-tongue. Of the four great European languages, English, French, German, and Italian, Italian is by far the simplest phonetically. It contains only seven or eight distinct vowel sounds, all of them pure and open, and a relatively small number of consonants. For this reason it is the easiest language of all to pronounce swiftly and correctly, and it strikes the foreign ear as delightfully frank and transparent. On the other hand, its phonetic poverty makes for a certain monotony and a lack of resource in the expression of imaginative and highly differentiated thought. The typical Italian voice is, therefore, rather high in pitch, vibrant, and penetrating, but not subtle or orotund. (The mighty Salvini stands outside of this generalization; Novelli does not.) Throatiness and huskiness of quality are entirely absent.

French has a rich assortment of vowel sounds, pure, mixed, nasal, and covered, none of which seem in the mouths of the best speakers ever to resonate farther back than the front teeth and often sound on the surface of the very lips themselves. The tendency of the language has been always to cast out unmusical and difficult consonant sounds, especially sibilants, and this facilitates greatly the emission of the voice. France, above all other countries, takes an effective pride in the transparency of its language and prizes a fine diction so highly that even in singers a limpid utterance is of more importance than beauty of voice. The French voice, consequently, is, like Italian, rather high in pitch, and of unequalled clearness, but somewhat nasal and dry in quality and lacking in nobility and sensuous charm.

German is a noble language, in number of words and in phonetic variety second to English alone, but its complicated syntax, its husky gutturals, its close-crowded consonants, and its deep-toned vowels produce a heavy, dark voice, poorly adapted to clear utterance or to the expression of the lighter sentiments, though unquestionably impressive in serious or majestic moments.

England and America possess in common a language of unequalled richness in respect

to both number of words and variety of sounds. It contains all the Italian vowels and, in addition, about a dozen pure and shade (or compound) vowels, some of which are not to be found in the other tongues. Happily, it lacks the French nasals and the German gutturals. So we have on our palette a choice of tone-colors greater than that of any other linguistic race, and, consequently, the material with which to paint the very noblest word pictures. To master the diction of so rich a language as English is, compared with, say, Italian, a long task, but it is a question of length of time rather than of relative difficulty.

English as it is spoken commonly in England and as it is spoken by the rank and file in America presents many points of difference. The best speech in both countries is, as I have said above, practically the same. England is pre-eminently the land of conservatism and tradition—an animal with a remarkably prehensile tail, Emerson called it—and has preserved many of its dialects and old tricks of speech, despite the influence of universal education toward creating and maintaining a common standard of purity of accent. We Americans, on the other hand, are almost altogether without local or linguistic traditions. We move about freely within a territory as long and as broad as the country itself, feeling at home in every part of it. Our public schools, the outgrowth of the old New England system, are pretty much the same everywhere. We all read the same magazines and derive our knowledge of the doings of the whole world from the same associated press reports. Our national turn of mind, which concerns itself with the present and the future rather than with the past, and our uniform educational influences make for a similarity of speech that often renders it difficult to guess from what part of the country a speaker comes. I do not mean to assert that distinguishing peculiarities of speech do not exist at all in our country, for such localisms as the open *o*'s and the flat *a*'s of eastern New England, and the softened utterance of those Southerners that have been surrounded all their lives by colored people are undeniable, but these peculiarities are disappearing gradually and our national speech is becoming as unisonant and as free from local color as our national architecture is uniform.

Correct habits of utterance and, consequently, an agreeable, melodious speaking voice, can be acquired and maintained only by one ambitious in self-culture. Good schooling turns our faces in the right direction; it is for our maturer years to decide if we are to continue in the path of self-improvement. We Americans have yet to show ourselves very wise or very open-minded seekers after culture. In a new country where inherited fortunes are exceptional and where almost every man and many a woman have had to scratch for a living, the task of bread-winning naturally assumes a position of prime importance, and the average citizen asks the world about him not to bother him with responsibilities and problems not immediately connected with his struggle for wealth. And so this average American citizen, although he can read and write and cipher, and in his early youth has had at least a bowing acquaintance with the humanities, forgets his "morning wishes" and unreflectingly accepts, in their place, "a few herbs and apples." Among his forgotten morning wishes is the wish to have an intelligent appreciation of music, art, and literature. He will listen to no serious music; the artistic movements of the day concern him not. His reading is limited to the daily papers, the cheaper magazines, and an occasional "best-seller." His correspondence passes through the hands of a stenographer and his epistolary style becomes altogether commercial and journalistic.

With a horizon limited to the stretch of his ambition to become rich and to help his family up in the social world, it is small wonder that our average citizen never even so much as turns his mind toward the subject of the correct and elegant utterance of his thoughts. Enough for him if he makes himself understood in the give and take of his hasty life. Caring nothing for the beauty of his own utterance, he sets a wretched example to his children, and thoughtlessly leaves to the school the responsibility for training them to express themselves in melodious speech. The school, in its turn, has little or no time to give to voice-training, and the result is that the child reaches maturity almost entirely unversed in this important branch of culture.

A mellow, sonorous voice is rare in any country. Its beauty in the rough is usually

due to an harmonious nature and good health, but just as by conscious effort we are able to harmonize our natures and improve our health, so also may we cultivate in ourselves a spontaneous, simple, and agreeable utterance in well-controlled and well-modulated tones. Such an utterance brings out all the potential beauty of the natural voice and is within the capacity of everybody. So long as we remain a nation of mere money-seekers, so long shall we speak in dry, eager, money-seeking voices, and it is only as we begin to realize (as, indeed, an ever-increasing number of Americans are beginning to realize) that material success is only a small part of the real success of life, that we shall place a proper estimate on the substantial value of a well-trained voice.

We are already agreed that every child ought to have some training in drawing and

music, even though in later life he may never put it to any regular use, but every child, except the dumb, is sure to use his voice daily as long as he lives. Why not, then, have it trained and developed to its full capacity for beauty and power? Its eloquence, no matter what his walk in life, will be for him a useful and a potent weapon, and for those he knows and meets a balm and a delight.

Foreigners may reproach us for our unmusical voices; the remedy lies with ourselves. We have inherited from our ancestors a noble and expressive language. We have received from nature voices potentially as melodious as those of any other people. Let us strive, then, by every means in our power to make our voices and utterances as noble and expressive as the language of our inheritance.

· THE POINT OF VIEW ·

HAVING acquired, if not celebrity, at least that measure of notoriety that makes one available for the purposes of our daily press, I was not long ago solicited to lend my attention for an hour or two to a searching inquiry into my past life, to retrace the first steps of my career, to explain the methods of my work, the services of my inspiration, my future projects, and, by natural progression, to elucidate any theories I might have to account for the happy conservation of my hair "for a longer period than some of my contemporaries," as Whistler once put it.

I have no word to say against this pleasant habit of interviewing, which my publisher assures me is not without its uses in the upward climb to the ranks of the "best sellers," for it is so firmly established in our manners and customs that few escape it; unless, perhaps, to question if its wide-spread benefits are not diminished by their very quantity. Still less shall my voice be raised against the practitioners who are employed upon this delicate inquest into the personality and the work of those who happen to travel under the search-light along the pathway of momentary notoriety. They conduct their

difficult task with all the consideration possible, and are generally willing to submit their report to the interviewed to avoid misquotation; so that the public can rest assured that in the majority of cases the disclosure of details concerning the work or the personal appearance of one of our celebrities has been carefully edited by its subject and thus possesses autobiographic value.

In the present instance at least, these conditions were carefully observed, and the emissary of the press being a charming young person with a properly high appreciation of her calling, nothing could exceed the chirurgical skill with which the journalistic probe was handled—quite without the infliction of pain to the patient. A few days later I was enabled to read the interview in manuscript, and, beyond a certain surprise at the well-rounded periods and a certain soulful tone into which my conversation had apparently lapsed, I was pleased to recognize its general integrity and was able, in journalistic phrase, to release it for publication.

But of this momentous experience there remains one impression and certain reflections born of it, which from slowness of perception I fear I did not make clear to my fair interviewer;

Entertaining
Angels
Unawares