

How do you help singers in a musical?



By Stig Christensen

In my work as a conductor of musicals, I've often had a bit of trouble helping an actor with a problem related to vocal technique. I knew how I wanted the song to sound, but not how the actor could get his or her voice to do what we wanted it to do. My attempts often ended in discussions about key, tempo and impossible vowels: a discussion a conductor often loses.

With her research, Cathrine Sadolin (CS) has changed all that. Against the backdrop of her scientific work investigating the functions of the voice, she has managed to create a whole new understanding of the structure of the structure of vocal sound. Her research resulted in a groundbreaking educational book about vocal technique entitled *Complete Vocal Technique* (CVT) which forms the core of the training that takes place at the Complete Vocal Institute (CVI) in Copenhagen. Every year, the CVI provides training for singers/vocalists – more than 1100 from 36 countries so far – and CVT trainers, who after graduation are slowly on their way to establishing themselves as CVT trainers in the countries they come from.

The most clear-cut difference between CVT and the other techniques I have learned about is a 'no nonsense' approach to singing. The training itself is unpretentious, extremely effective and measured solely by its results, and I am amazed at the results it achieves.



The first time I met CS was when I worked as a pianist at one of her courses at the Danish Artists Union. She was teaching professional singers/vocalists her new technique, which is based on dividing the voice into four different functions:

- 1) Neutral
- 2) Curbing
- 3) Overdrive
- 4) Edge

Each function is characterised by an ideal sound level and, not least, a set of ideal vowels, and it's actually an 'Aha!' experience to see and hear a singer's reaction to the technique.

I asked Ole Rasmus Møller, a graduate of the CVT trainer programme, about his experiences: 'I first met CS twenty years ago. Even back then, her theories were groundbreaking, so my decision to take the trainers' course was an obvious one once I got the time and chance. I enjoy my work at CVI and the coaching jobs I get outside the Institute. In addition to the research that everyone can access just by going to the CVI website, she has really thought the system through from an educational point of view. We think that singing should be simple and straightforward, in spite of the fact that we have a very specific approach to vocal technique. In reality we "just" have to unlearn bad habits if these habits are hindering us in our vocal work. We are supposed to guide the singers, not tell them what sounds good and what doesn't. In other words, we

shouldn't force our personal preferences on them.'

Also vocal directors or conductors can use this technique with singers that are having trouble reaching a high note or run out of air in mid-phrase. Although getting especially actors to change a vowel in a syllable so that they are able to sing a phrase can be tricky, it's incredible how quickly you can get good results if you know a little about where in the mouth the vowels can best be pronounced and how you can twist them without affecting the listeners' ability to understand the word. We in the audience often let you get away with when it comes to 'alternative' ways to sing words. Just think of all the opera passages when the soloist changes a back vowel, like the 'a' in 'Larsen', to an 'e' sound, or even goes all the way to an 'i' in order to sing it, and how willing the audience is to accept and understand it.

CVT does not clash with current vocal theory: rather, it takes the many different hypotheses and descriptions of the voice previously used by vocal coaches and makes them more scientific. All teaching methods are taken up for review every so often.

When you recommend a certain vocal technique – perhaps especially as an instrumentalist – you are sometimes caught in the crossfire of an almost religious war, because everyone has their favourites and only lets go of them very, very reluctantly. For some singers, their voice is almost a 'second personality' that 'resides' inside them and sometimes takes over. To a musician that plays a visible instrument, this can seem a bit high-strung, and I must admit that I suspect that some singers deliberately work against the way that CVT renders their voice 'visible'. This is completely incomprehensible to me, and it reminds me a little of the resistance there used to be (is still?) in certain

rock and pop music circles against learning how to read sheet music.

With her institute and highly competent teaching staff, CS is, in my opinion, in the process of creating a whole new generation of singers and vocalists who, through

their CVT training and the social network at the Institute, will create a new and healthier vocal culture in Denmark.

As a conductor with the occasional 'duty' to direct singers, I can only recommend that you familiarise

yourself with this technique and learn its most basic principles. One way to do this is to visit the website www.completevocalinstitute.com.