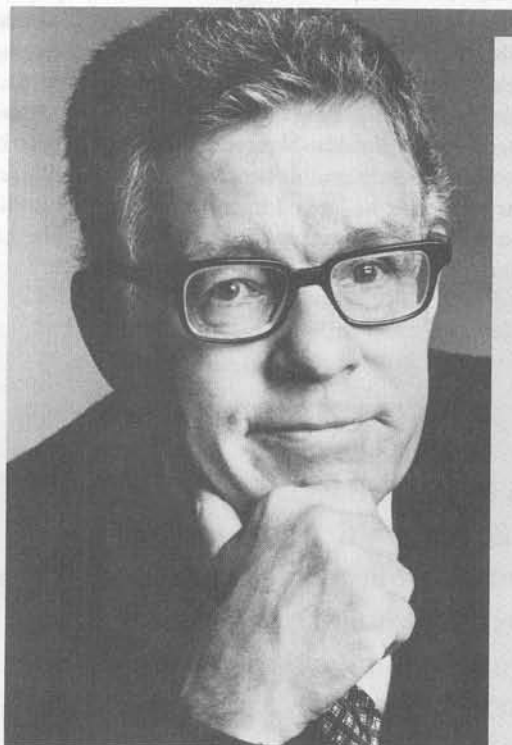


‘The singer must *orchestrate* to create a dialogue’

Cornelius Reid has been teaching voice since 1934. He is the author of five books including “Bel Canto: Principles and Practices,” “The Free Voice,” the encyclopedic “Dictionary of Vocal Terminology,” and most recently, “Essays on the Nature of Singing.” He has lectured and presented master classes on voice in the United States, in Germany, and in England. He has been on the faculty of Marymount College, General Theological Seminary, and most recently, Teachers College, Columbia University in Manhattan. Mr. Reid has made a lifelong investigation of the old Italian teaching methods which first created bel canto, to try to resurrect it today. This interview was conducted by Kathy Wolfe on March 13, 1993 in New York City.



‘When you sing a musical composition, even a simple song, you orchestrate it with your voice. And you can only do that if you understand how to utilize the different registers. If we vary the pitch from the original, the human singing registers will shift in different places from that which the composer intended, and we undermine the entire principle according to which the composer created the composition in the first place.’

Fidelio: Singers are familiar with your books, *Bel Canto* and *The Free Voice*, but would it be possible to summarize your basic precepts for the interested layman?

Reid: They’re simple. I got into this because I was disenchanted as a voice student with poor instruction years ago, so I started reading books, and read back into the *bel canto* era, and discovered there were common principles believed by the teachers of the time, rather than today, when teachers “do their own thing.”

Fidelio: You discovered what appeared to be a universal principle?

Reid: Oh, absolutely. In my new *Dictionary of Vocal Terminology* I describe how the basic Italian method went to Germany, to France, England, and all over the world, and that those principles were intact until Manuel Garcia invented the laryngoscope in 1854, when for the first time people

could see the larynx.

Unlike today, the concept of vocal registers, registration, was the basic philosophy and understanding upon which the old Italian teachers operated and built their entire system, throughout the era of high *bel canto* in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In fact the only dispute prior to Garcia’s invention, was whether there were two registers, or three.

The whole idea of the term register is the same as they had in the old organs, which we still have in the organ today, in which you change the register. This is done by pulling out the stop, pulling a lever which triggers a mechanical action, as a result of which, air is sent through a different set of pipes. There is a physical mechanism in the instrument which, when called upon, activates a different set of pipes, which produce a different tone quality, the product of the different shaping of pipes, and their size and dimensions.

Fidelio: So it’s very clear on the organ just what a new register is? And this concept of register, and shift from one register to a distinct register, has been clear for hundreds of years?

Reid: Yes, I pull out the stop and mechanical processes go on which put air into different pipes, and the character of the pipes, their shape and dimension produces a particular tone quality.

So a register is really a mechanical action. And therefore, what is commonly believed today is incorrect, that is, that tone quality, pitch range, sensation, are causal or occur by themselves. None of those things are causative, just as the sounds which come out of the organ are not caused by those things.

The causative factor obviously is the mechanical process according to which I’ve pulled out a stop and activated a particular pipe. So, therefore, instead of considering the registers to be sensations, vibrations in the head, for example, or pitch ranges, higher or lower in

the tone compass, a register is actually a muscle system.

There are only two such muscle systems in the larynx: the cricothyroids, and the arytenoids. They are both supplied with sensory and motor nerve impulses, as is much of the respiratory system, by the Vagus nerve. The function of the cricothyroids is exclusively confined to regulating pitch, and they are innervated by the superior branch of the Vagus nerve. But the Vagus nerve splits off, and its second lower branch, which is the longer branch, goes down under the aorta and up to the larynx, supplying the remaining muscles including the arytenoids.

From that we can extrapolate two

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things: the two registers are the two muscle systems, each of which is supplied with neurological impulses by two different branches of a nerve.

Second, although the cricothyroids and arytenoids are both intrinsic muscles of the larynx—that is, these muscles which control the vocal folds [vocal cords] are involuntary muscles—because, however, the Vagus nerve branches off into two, we have the ability, to isolate the cricothyroids from the arytenoids, to access the one or the other muscle system. We also have the option of putting them together and teaching them how to work together, even though they are absolutely, totally involuntary, and two totally separate muscle systems.

Now: if there are only two branches of the Vagus nerve, which supply only two muscle systems, how do we account for all the masters who heard three registers?

That is very simple. Once you put them together, in the middle portion where the register shifts or breaks, the two combine their textural and qualitative properties, and they create a third quality, to the ear.

Fidelio: Perhaps that’s why the old school often called the middle register the “center of the voice”?

Reid: Quite possibly. Now coming back to Manuel Garcia, after he invented the laryngoscope, he looked in and thought he saw three distinct physical conformations of the vocal folds, and that started a debate which became a source of error. He did not recognize the fact that a register is a muscle system, because he

could not see and therefore did not know at that time that the actual muscle systems were only two.

Fidelio: How does the rising modern pitch affect the registers? Does it cause a problem?

Reid: As with all natural laws, you can go a little bit this way and a little bit that way without damaging the fundamental functioning. But the question which I couldn’t answer before was: to what extent? And certainly you are right, that if you have music that’s written, for example, if Verdi wrote it, in a certain context, and a certain pitch range, then . . .

Fidelio: You can’t just change it arbitrarily?

Reid: Well you can, but ought you? Talk about vocal textures. We could do this arbitrarily. I could pull out stops with my pupils and I can make them

make all sorts of sounds without telling them how. But should we?

The voice functions either within its law, nature’s law, or beyond its law. And when it’s beyond its law, then you pay the penalty. It doesn’t matter whether it’s your living habits, or your singing habits, or your reasoning habits.

This thing we sing with is an organic system. And an organic system does what? It reacts to environmental pressures. As I wrote in the essay, to me a beautiful tone is no different in principle than a beautiful rose that blooms on my rose bushes when I am at my place

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AN ANALYSIS
Cornelius L. Reid



in the country. It is the product of careful cultivation and that which is organically correct relative to the environment to which it has been exposed.

So then you say, what is the vocal environment? Everybody knows it; everybody knows that this piece is vocal and this piece is unvocal and therefore difficult. But there is a certain arrangement, in certain compositions, of pitch, intensity, and vowel combinations, which is congenial to the vocal ease of the vocal organs.

Fidelio: And has this overall vocal environment been affected by the big problem we have today of rising pitch?

Reid: Frankly, I just recently became consciously aware of it as an issue when I read the Schiller Institute's Manual on Tuning and Registration. My concern was reinforced, because I had a pupil who sang the Kaiserin in Austria at the Salzburg Music Festival last summer. That goes from low G to C# and then a sustained D—all in the space of about five minutes of singing. Now George Solti was the conductor, and Solti took the orchestra up to 448 Hz. She said it was just too difficult to sing.

This happened to her just after I had

gotten the book from you. That made me aware of it. And I was doubly interested because she got friendly with one of the oboists in the orchestra, and said that the oboist, too was complaining about having a terrible time getting through the performance. The oboist's embouchure, her lips, were so disturbed by having to put that excessive tension into the playing, that she said she simply could not both play a full rehearsal in the afternoon and then play the performance at night.

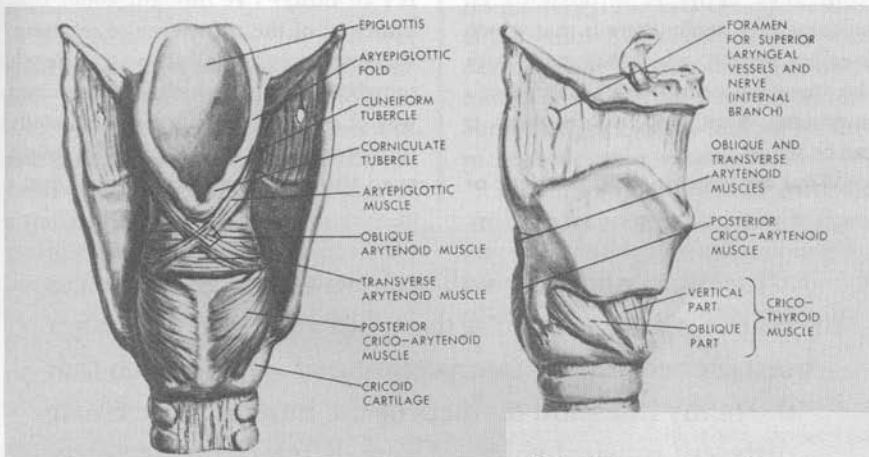
So that's what put it in my mind; I

they should be sung and played at the original pitch.

One of the things I relate to my pupils is the fact that when you sing a musical composition, be it a simple song, you orchestrate it with your voice. And you can only do that if you understand how to utilize the different registers.

If we vary the pitch from the original, the human singing registers will shift in different places from that which the composer had intended. We thus undermine this entire principle, according to which the composer has created the composition in the first place.

In great classical compositions, each musical line, each individual pitch has a specific emotional quality in the human voice, which is distinct from every other sung note. Each pitch has a specific emotional impact on the listener. The human voice when it sings a Bb has a textual quality, an emotional quality, which is distinct from that of a B. Thus, of course, if the composer writes something at a certain pitch, and we



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quite agree. If the texture that the composer had in his mind was the texture when the tuning pitch was thus and so—and then you raise the pitch four or eight hertz or more, you get to the point where the texture that he had in mind is destroyed, because the voice produces another texture at the higher pitch.

The works of a great composer cannot be transposed, and therefore

move the pitch around, either up—or down—we destroy the composer's intentions. And therefore as Verdi said, we cannot have a situation where the note which is called A in Paris, should become a Bb in Rome.

This is integral to the poetic singing of a text. One of the most important principles for the singing student to learn is that, just as a conductor will orchestrate the string voices distinctly, to create a dialogue as heard against the



Figure 11. Demonstrating the relative positions of the chest, falsetto and head voice in the tonal range, reported in most early writers as being applicable to all voice types, male and female. (From Garcia, Garcia's Schule, der Kunst des Gesanges.)

Illustrations from "A Dictionary of Vocal Terminology."

wind voices and so on, so the singer must orchestrate the interpretation of an aria, such that the many hues and textures of the human voice create different musical voices. These different poetic voices are based on the difference between the various vocal registers, each of which are produced by distinct physiological means.

If you do that and the voice is free enough to do it, then you end up with the texture and the quality that the composer had in mind, and also through that you have basically a sense of the feeling that he had at the same time. So instead of this modern “brighter” feeling, he wanted something different, for example, a warmer feeling. That’s the way the music was supposed to sound.

It’s just texturally wrong, to forget what the composer wants. The composers that wrote for the voice and wrote well knew that, for example, on a certain pitch and a certain vowel, at a certain level of intensity, within the framework of the phrase, that vowel, that pitch and that intensity and that tonal texture were exactly right for conveying the emotion that was contained within the phrase.

Now, since, just as when you raise the tuning pitch of the piano or the violin, you make the tone brighter, so when you raise the tuning pitch for the voice singing that same composition, the higher tuning takes away and diminishes those textural properties. So, forgetting the fact that it was not what the composer intended, the real point of importance is that the emotional content that’s present in the tonal texture as the composer heard it, the listener is deprived of the emotional experience that comes out of identifying with that content.

Fidelio: What’s the effect on the composer’s intention that certain poetic statements be heard?

Reid: In great music the poetry is enhanced because the verbal text has a given meaning. But the verbal text—this goes against what everybody believes today, but this is true, take my word for it—the verbal text is illuminated because, when the voice sounds

right, has the right textural properties for the given pitch ranges, and the composer has written music that brings out those properties, and demands for its expression those particular textural properties, those are the properties that elevate the meaning of the composition far above the literal meaning of the words themselves.

Fidelio: As Keats said, “heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter.” Also sometimes described as “singing in between the notes.”

Reid: Yes. This is important. In Japanese philosophy there is that which is called the *ma*, which has to do with the space between. And that’s what’s important. What happens in between. It can be silent.

What happens in that moment of

sound as textures which have their own emotional quality.

And this is one of the reasons why you don’t get many people who can sing a song and really move you.

Fidelio: When you teach, do you talk about this with students?

Reid: Sometimes I do. If they’re interesting or if a point comes up and I feel it appropriate.

But almost everything I’ve ever learned or written about comes out of my experience at the piano, teaching. It’s all things I’ve thought about that came out of the experience of teaching. Because, theoretically, you can teach somebody to sing, which is not the best way of doing it, because it’s emotionally threatening to the pupil, and he might even think you’re an idiot and don’t

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silence has more to say than the music itself. Because even beyond music, it is the unspoken word that has so many dimensions that it can’t even be measured or put down in terms of music.

Recently I heard an interview on the radio about this nonsense: It’s all in the words. Well, that simply means that anybody can sing a beautiful song recital because a lot of people can stand up and recite the words quite beautifully. But it’s done in such a way that there’s a supposition that Schubert never wrote music that was really worthwhile to stand by itself, that there’s no such thing as musical form, there’s no such thing as sensitivity for phrasing, there’s no such thing as an artistic commitment to the making of sound and the awareness of

have any ideas.

But theoretically, you don’t have to converse any more than you do coming back to the rose on the rose bush. You don’t have to tell the rose bush how to grow. And you don’t have to tell the bloom how to bloom. And you really don’t have to tell people how to sing. Because what you can tell about it, that, it is not.

Fidelio: And yet somehow you have to communicate it.

Reid: Well, I communicate in the same way. I put my rose bush not on the north side of my house up in the country, where the winds are brutal and attempt to kill it. I put it on the south side, where it’s protected.