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Loaded Words: Finding the Right Place for "Placement"

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INTRODUCTION

When students come to my studio for the first time, a get-to-know-you period commences. As I become familiar with their voices, the musical styles they most love to sing, and the ways they learn best, they gradually get a sense for how I approach the voice, what sounds I listen for and encourage, and how I communicate in lessons.

Part of this process involves building a common vocabulary. With so much image-based terminology used in voice instruction, it is important for me to know what my students mean when they use certain words to describe their singing. In the beginning, I try not to foist my understanding of terminology onto them by insisting that they define everything the way I do. Rather, I prefer to allow a shared language to evolve over time, discussing terms as they come up in the course of our work together.

As this process plays out, we inevitably uncover "loaded words" that require extra attention. "Support," "open throat," and "head voice" are examples of terms that can have vastly different definitions from student to student. When these words arise, I ask questions to decipher exactly what the students mean: "What do you do differently after someone asks you to use more support?" "When you feel an open throat, is it because you engaged something or released something?" "How would you describe the sound of your head voice?"

One of the words that prompts the most discussion is "placement." Placement offers a treasure trove of tried and true solutions for some teachers while it presents a Pandora's box of problems for others. In this column, I will examine how singers and pedagogues have experienced and defined placement over the years. I will then offer a process for the studio that relates placement to individual sensation to try to help students and teachers reach a mutual understanding and give this loaded word its "place."

PLACEMENT IN PRINT

Tasked with defining placement for *A Dictionary for the Modern Singer*, author Matthew Hoch's first words get right to the controversy, identifying it as a concept in voice teaching that is "prevalent, but subjective."[1] He points

out that, as a means to achieving optimal resonance, placement can be more objective and fact-based if it is synonymous with vocal modification. However, when placement is sought by describing sensation, it is less definitive, since "the perception of sensation differs from singer to singer."[2]

This subjectivity is almost comically revealed in *Master Singers: Advice from the Stage*, which provides interviews with prominent opera singers who discuss their vocal technique.[3] In the book, Thomas Hampson unequivocally states, "I do not use the word *placement*," whereas Alan Held says, "Placement is the most important aspect of my singing." Kathleen Kim says, "I don't try to place the sound. I just try to feel the sensation, which for me is more space in the back of my throat." Eric Owens, on the other hand, says, "I never feel that this space is in the back. If anything, I'll feel like the space is through the top of my head, in addition to the forward placement." Owens also says, "I feel resonance and placement, mostly, in the front/mask area," while Jonas Kaufmann flatly states, "I do not feel the voice in the mask."

Placement advocates and admonishers abounded in previous centuries as well. Polish artist Jean de Reszke (1850–1925) taught his students to use "placement of the tone in the masque and at the bridge of the nose," which may have been accomplished via "the singer's grimace (*la grimace de la chanteuse*) for high notes"—techniques identified by author and pedagogue Richard Miller as part of twentieth century French voice instruction.[4] Meanwhile, in a 1945 NATS *Bulletin*, Albert Lukken, former dean of the University of Tulsa College of Fine Arts, referred to frontal placement as "one of the most controversial issues of all times," adding that "confusion has been widespread and harmful."[5] Two decades later, William Vennard, an early champion of voice science, offered his thoughts in his seminal text, *Singing: The Mechanism and the Technic*.

> There are many who say, "Placement is a myth. You cannot direct a tone anywhere; science tells us that every tone goes into all the cavities it can and vibrates the bones of the head and most of the bones of the upper body." All of this is true.[6]

He notes that some of the placement "scoffers" sarcastically remark that singers cannot resonate tones in their heads "unless one's brain pan were an empty cavity." Still, he stops short of summarily dismissing the use of placement in vocal instruction.

> I think is is better to admit the validity of imagery as a teaching aid, although one should avoid the pitfall of literalism and not make the mistake of locating the placement in terms of anatomy.[7]

Author and pedagogue Scott McCoy contributes to the discussion (at first, without ever using the word placement) by distinguishing between *forced* resonance and *free* resonance in his "Singing and Voice Science" chapter in the NATS-sponsored *So You Want to Sing* books.[8] According to McCoy, forced resonance in singing refers to our *private* resonance, meaning the vibrations we feel in certain areas of the body like the chest, head, and mask (generally defined as the cheekbone area of the face). These internal vibrations impact the way we perceive our voices but do not result in sound that our audience hears. On the other hand, free resonance is what occurs when sound travels through the open spaces of our vocal tract. Some of these sound waves reflect back on our vocal folds and boost certain frequencies of tone. This sound does reach outside listeners and is what gives each of us individual vocal quality.

McCoy goes a step further in *Your Voice: An Inside View*, linking forced resonance to placement.

> . . . depending on your personal physiognomy, you might indeed experience resonance or feelings of tone placement in one or more of those regions [in the mask, at the hard palate, through the top of your head] . . . While these sensations—caused by forced resonance—can be extremely helpful to individual singers, they are less reliable when used for teaching.[9]

He explains that this lack of reliability is because we are all uniquely made and, as Hoch alluded to above, "one singer's experience of resonance often is very different from that of another, even if both produce similar sounds using the same fundamental vocal technique."[10] In other words, sensations produced through forced resonance may be beneficial to singers. But since these sensations are not uniform, I should not expect my students to feel vibrations the way I do. Asking students to feel sensations in the mask because that is where I feel the vibrations of forced resonance in my own voice may actually be counterproductive or confusing if their personal physi-

ognomies do not naturally elicit the same sensations. Just as two people can watch the same movie and come away with different impressions, two singers can produce the same pitch with essentially the same vocal technique and yet feel different sensations caused by those tones.

ACTION VS. RESULT (CHICKEN OR THE EGG)

Another key element to determine with students is whether they understand placement (the sensations created by forced resonance) as an *action* or a *result*—a first step or an outcome. As Miller indicates, singers *should* rely upon these sensations as they self-monitor the sounds they produce, "but those sensations should be the result of coordinated function, not of attempting to 'put' sound in places where it cannot go."[11]

I find that when my students actively try to "put" their sound somewhere, they often scrunch their noses, squint their eyes, sneer their lips, furrow their brows, tense their tongues, and/or tilt their heads forward in an effort to *create* forward sensation. Since I cannot feel what is happening inside my students' heads, I cannot say with any certainty whether those actions actually elicit forward sensations for them or not. I do, however, suggest that they may be able to achieve their sound goals without all of that extra muscular activity, which almost certainly impacts their ability to use their faces to expressively relate the meaning of the text they are singing.

I prefer my students heighten their internal awareness to identify what sensations *naturally* exist when they sing, as Miller suggests, with "coordinated function." If they are regularly attuned to these sensations and monitor how they change in different parts of their ranges, on different vowels, and at different dynamic levels, students begin to develop a reference point of sensation that they can draw upon later. Therefore, part of the common language I work to develop in the studio is to help students identify their own "language of sensation" when they sing, rather than expecting them to adopt my own sensations of forced resonance and the words I use to describe them.

SENSATION EXPLORATION

I ask my students to consider that placement can refer to *any* of the physical vibrations or sensations brought about by forced resonance, not just those experienced in the front of the face. Then I take them through a series of exploration exercises to identify where in their bodies they may "feel" sound.

First, *a la* McCoy, I ask them to place a hand on their chests and to sustain an [ɑ] on a pitch in the lower part of their range.[12] I ask if they can feel any vibrations at their hands; nearly all students acknowledge that they can. Next, since they have identified the presence of vibrations, I ask them to remove their hands, make the sound again, and see if they can feel those vibrations using only their internal senses. Again, most acknowledge that they can.

Second, we move up the chain and I ask them to place a hand on the front of their throats (over the larynx) while they again intone an [ɑ]. When they acknowledge sensations at their hands, I again ask them to remove their hands, repeat the sound, and observe whether they can feel the vibrations internally, which most are able to do.

When we get this far, students who have had previous singing instruction usually stop me to say that, although they *can* feel their sound in the chest and throat, they have been told that they are not *supposed* to. I use this opportunity to explain that, in my estimation, feelings of all kinds are not inherently right or wrong; they just provide us with information. This applies to physical sensation as well as emotions. Once we have the information our feelings provide, we can decide how to act; but to deny our feelings may cut us off from important feedback our physical and emotional selves are trying to give us. Sometimes we "go with our gut" and act on our feelings and sometimes we just acknowledge them and move on.

I use the example that, even though I have been trying to limit my sugar intake, I still occasionally crave doughnuts. The feeling of that craving is not *wrong*, but when I acknowledge that it exists, I feel more empowered to consciously make healthier choices. Similarly, it is not wrong to feel vibrations or sensations in the chest or throat when singing. The previous exercise demonstrated that they *do* exist. But we can choose to put the focus of our attention there or in other places.

As we continue our exploration, I ask the students to put their hands over their lips and cheeks, to sing a sustained [m] to notice the vibrations, and then to

remove the hand to feel the vibrations internally. As they acknowledge these vibrations, I ask the students to sing a sustained [m] and to slowly open to [ɑ] to see if they can still detect sensations in the same area of the face on the [ɑ] as on the [m]. Most students are able to feel these sensations, even though they are generally less noticeable on the [ɑ] than on the [m].

This exercise can go on for as long as the students have the patience for it, singing in different ranges, on different vowels, or at different dynamic levels, all with the idea of simply noticing where they feel vibratory sensations without trying to influence those sensations by placing them anywhere specific. Inevitably, some areas are revealed as eliciting strong sensations, while the sensations in other areas are more faint or only detectable with their hands and not with internal awareness.

One final time, I have the students place their hands on their cheeks and lips during a sustained [m], after which I ask if the sensations in the chest are still present. Most students cannot answer without singing the exercise again and returning their attention to the chest. After they have done so, discovering that the chest vibrations *are* still there, they begin to realize that sensations may be present in many parts of their body at once. When they have identified the numerous areas where sensations are occurring, all they need to do to feel vibrations in one place or another is shift their attention to that "place."

Lastly, I ask them to intentionally "place their attention" (not their sound) in different areas where they previously identified sensations and to notice whether their tone quality changes. I reinforce that they do not need to purposely make mechanical adjustments to do this; they simply need to shift their focus and observe what happens.

In most cases, subtle mechanical changes do occur, causing a change in sound quality. As they shift their focus toward the teeth, forehead, or cheekbones, the sound tends to get brighter or more present. If they focus on the top of their heads or at the area where the soft palate and hard palate meet, the sound becomes slightly warmer and the vowels may become more "neutral"—[ɑ] becomes more like [ʌ], [i] becomes more like [ɪ], etc.

Therefore, when students "place their attention" after exploring all the areas where sensations already exist, their mechanics change with less conscious effort and their voices take on different acoustic qualities. By contrast, when students "place their sound," they change their mechanics first in order to create a sensation that their physiognomy may or may not encourage. Though the acoustic qualities of their tone may indeed change when they place their sound, it often involves more mechanical activity than is necessary (scrunching their noses, furrowing their brows, etc.).

CONCLUSION

Words we use in our studios matter. As voice pedagogy progresses, our use of language must also evolve to better articulate the intention of our instruction without contradicting physical realities.

Of course, there is a growing discussion of just how valuable this degree of internal focus may or may not actually be in singing, which stands to influence our future approach to placement. And, like most technical suggestions, the above understanding of placement can be taken to such an extreme that it may become more detriment than benefit. Therefore, the process outlined above is not foolproof and has not been a magic cure-all for every single singer, nor is it intended to be. But I have found that when I encourage students to develop a sensory language of their own based on the unique and personal sensations they receive when singing, they tend to develop reliable physical reference points that can be more consistently accessed.

Just as our experiences with music are emotionally unique, our physical experiences of singing may be similarly individualized. Rather than expect my students to feel their voices in the ways I do, I prefer to facilitate the exploration of their own physical sensations to discover how it may inform their singing.

Rev. Hilary Thimmesh, O.S.B., once wrote, "A sense of place depends most of all on a shared history."[13] Granting this use of the word "place" lies outside the context of vocal production, parallels do exist. As voice teachers, the history we create with our students occurs over a series of lessons, allowing us to develop a shared lexicon. In lieu of codified definitions, words like "placement" may have different connotations from student to student based on their personal sensations. If we allow for this, even the most loaded words can still have a place.

NOTES

1. Matthew Hoch, *A Dictionary for the Modern Singer* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 138.
2. Ibid.
3. Donald George and Lucy Mauro, *Master Singers: Advice from the Stage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 13–14.
4. Richard Miller, "Historical Overview of Voice Pedagogy," in Robert Thayer Sataloff, ed., *Vocal Health and Pedagogy: Science, Assessment, and Treatment* (San Diego, CA: Plural Publishing, Inc., 2017), 20.
5. Albert Lukken, "A Plea for Simplicity in Singing," *The Bulletin* 2, no. 3 (December 1945): 3.
6. William Vennard, *Singing: The Mechanism and the Technic* (New York: Carl Fischer, Inc., 1967), 120–121.
7. Ibid., 121.
8. Scott McCoy, "Singing and Voice Science," in Karen Hall, *So You Want to Sing Music Theater: A Guide for Professionals* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 34–35.
9. Scott McCoy, *Your Voice: An Inside View,* 2nd edition (Delaware, OH: Inside View Press, 2012), 27.
10. Ibid.
11. Richard Miller, *On the Art of Singing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 84.
12. McCoy, "Singing and Voice Science," 35.
13. Colman J. Barry, O. S. B. and Robert L. Spaeth, eds., *A Sense of Place* (Collegeville, MN: Saint John's University Press, 1987), i.

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A recipient of the NATS Voice Pedagogy Award, he has given presentations for the Voice Foundation, PAVA, VASTA, the National Center for Voice and Speech, the University of Utah Voice Disorders Center, TEDxSaltLakeCity and for NATS at chapter, regional, and national conferences.

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Manternach has made solo appearances with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, Cleveland Chamber Symphony, and Sinfonia Salt Lake, among others, and his stage credits range from Eisenstein in *Die Fledermaus* to Miles Gloriosus in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* to Belmonte in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (Sankt Anton, Austria). For two seasons, he served as apprentice-artist at the Skylight Opera Theatre in Milwaukee.

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