

**The Naked Voice:
A Wholistic Approach to
Singing**

W. STEPHEN SMITH

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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W. STEPHEN SMITH

with MICHAEL CHIPMAN

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Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

This book is dedicated to my students.

— W. STEPHEN SMITH

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THE PROLOGUE TO PAGLIACCI

by Leoncavallo

TRANSLATION BY W. STEPHEN SMITH

If you please? Ladies! Gentlemen! Excuse me if alone I present myself.

I am the Prologue.

Once again the author wishes to put the old characters on the stage.

*In part he wants to return to the old usage,
but he sends to you a new messenger—me.*

But not to tell you as before:

*“The tears that we shed are false!
Don’t be alarmed by our sufferings and torments.”
No! No!*

Instead the author has sought to paint for you a slice of life.

*He has for his maxim only that the artist is a man,
and that for men he must write.
Truth was his inspiration!*

*A nest of memories sang in the depth of his soul one day,
and with real tears he wrote while his sobs beat time for him!
Therefore, you will see love just as human beings love.
You will see the wretched fruits of hatred and the spasms of sadness,
You will hear howls of rage and cynical laughter!*

*And you, rather than just looking at our outward garb,
consider our souls.*

*Because we are men of flesh and bone,
and just like you,
we breathe the same air of this orphaned world!*

The concept I have told you.

Now listen how it is unfolded.

Let’s go! Begin!

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Preface

I have been privileged to play a significant role in the publication of this book. Having studied voice with Steve Smith for five years, I found his approach to singing to be elegant, powerful, and totally unique. I felt that a book about his techniques and philosophies would be an important addition to the existing literature on singing and vocal pedagogy (not to mention my own bookshelf).

Over the years, many people had suggested to Steve that he should write a book, but I proposed to him that with my background as a professional writer, singer, and voice student, I might be the one to help him get it done. He agreed, and we started moving forward with the process. That process entailed writing a proposal, finding a publisher, then recording dozens of hours of interviews with Steve, each one focused on a specific topic for the various chapters of the book. Over the course of a year, I transcribed those interviews word for word, edited them into readable prose, and then Steve, his wife, Carol, and I combed through each chapter in great detail many times, making sure every sentence accurately and authentically reflected his ideas.

I emphasize that I take no credit whatsoever for any of the ideas, opinions, philosophies, or techniques laid out in this book. My only intent from the very beginning has been to communicate Steve's ideas in his voice and in his words with clarity and simplicity.

Although this book cannot take the place of regular private lessons, I hope it will be a powerful supplemental tool for singers and singing teachers. Readers should know that every sentence of every chapter was painstakingly crafted to present an accurate reflection of Steve's remarkable approach to singing. Based on personal experience, I believe that anyone interested in singing better will benefit from careful study of the philosophies and techniques included herein.

For over a decade I have been on an amazing journey as a writer and singer. I could not have undertaken this journey alone, and I offer profound thanks to my former voice teachers Tricia Swanson, Marla Volovna, Jean Ronald LaFond, and especially Betty Jeanne Chipman and Richard Miller. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Steve Smith, whose patience and encouragement put me on the path to discovering my true voice. I must also thank my mentors at Utah State University, Joyce Kinkead and Brian McCuskey, who taught me to write with focus and simplicity and to seek out the truth inherent in paradox. Finally, Jan Beatty at Oxford University Press has been a fine and gracious editor, and I am honored to have worked with her and Steve on this life-changing project.

MICHAEL CHIPMAN

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The Naked Voice

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Introduction

In Pursuit of Authenticity

I have spent my professional career teaching singers how to undress (vocally, emotionally, and psychologically). My goal is to help them clear away the entanglements, hang-ups, insecurities, habits, and fears that keep their voices from singing true and free. The process is sometimes long and difficult, but often rewarding and crucial to personal and professional success.

In my teaching, I try to communicate simply and directly. I have tried to do the same in this book. When I told one of my students about this project, he said that it should have “as much Arkansas in it as possible” (I was born and raised in Arkansas). With that in mind, I have attempted to make the style of writing straightforward and accessible.

This book is intended for all who desire to sing or improve their singing. The concepts are designed to help singers—from the amateur in the local church choir to the world-famous opera star—strip away the encumbrances that keep them from revealing their essential, “naked voice.” In the process they uncover their truest, most authentic selves.

The word *naked* usually refers to the physical body, and for me conjures images of Adam and Eve blissfully nude in the Garden of Eden. They didn’t know they were naked, so they were not ashamed. Eating the forbidden fruit made them aware of good and evil and filled them with shame, so they began

the process of covering up. We evidently are in a similar state of shame because we are still covering our nakedness—hence, the emergence of the multibillion-dollar fashion industry, which is devoted to this idea.

The way in which we cover ourselves and the amount of skin we cover says a lot about who and what we are, and in our culture those cover-ups (i.e., our clothes) often define our differences. In corporate America, “clothes make the man,” and job applicants are told that the cardinal rule of job interviews is to “dress for success.” How we dress tells how we want to be perceived.

Nakedness levels the playing field and connotes something essential, pure, unfettered, and authentic. Nakedness also refers to the process of stripping off our metaphorical clothes to reveal our essence—our uniqueness and individuality. This kind of honesty is especially important in the performing arts, where the audience seeks an immediate connection with the performers on stage. Although they might not understand this exchange on a conscious level, I think the audience senses when performers give an honest performance. They also sense when they don’t.

Why do we go to the theater or the opera? I believe that deep down, every person wants to be authentic, and great performers help us connect with that part of ourselves. Achieving authenticity is not an easy process, especially when most societal organizations and institutions need us to conform to a certain set of rules, to fit a particular mode, to “cover up” in a certain way. I am not a nonconformist; on the contrary, I understand that in conforming or relating to social pressures we come to understand our identity and place in the world. However, the process of returning to our essence—our most basic self—requires us to strip away our cover-ups and reexamine society’s rules and conventions to discover truths that might have been obscured over time.

Through this process of stripping away, we grow up. We question the values, rules, and expectations that have been given to us, and we reject them, modify them, or embrace them as our own. That ownership is the key to releasing our fears and insecurities, accepting our gifts and abilities, and rediscovering the original passions that were given to us at birth. Having rediscovered that essential nature, we can endeavor to act with integrity in every aspect of life. No one does that perfectly or completely; the value is in the *pursuit*.

I have been pursuing authenticity for much of my life. I confess to falling short of that goal; but experience has taught me that authenticity is a process, not a destination. Deep in everyone’s soul is a longing for authenticity. However, because the journey is long and hard and requires a constant rejection of the status quo, many don’t even begin. Others quit when fear and insecurity set in.

The Naked Voice: A Wholistic Approach to Singing is a book about how to sing, but it is also about the pursuit of authenticity. Singing is the metaphor for that pursuit, and here it is much more—singing provides an immediate physical application of my ideas and philosophies in a practical way. Many of my students have found that the process of learning to sing is intricately connected to their personal development. Although my philosophies and techniques are focused on good singing, my students often become more authentic people along the way. Their moments of discovery are my greatest joy in teaching, and I am humbled to be part of that process. I have gratefully woven many of their stories into the narrative of this book.

My philosophies and techniques are inseparable from my personal history, so I will share some of my story to highlight the pivotal moments in my journey. In these moments, I made choices that defied the expectations of my family, church, and society. I am not telling this as a model for anyone else to follow; it is simply *my* story and a way to “expose myself” and my unique path. I respect each person’s path and am intrigued by every story. Just as no two voices are the same, every path is unique.

My Story

I was born in a small town in northeast Arkansas in 1950, the fifth of five children, to parents who grew up poor during the Depression. Because my dad was the second of eleven children and my mom the second of nine, they were both taught that working hard and caring for your family were the only essentials in life. My mom never held a paying job after my parents were married, because women were supposed to “stay home, have babies, and fry meat.”

We were members of the Church of Christ, a conservative fundamentalist religion in which singing was very important. My dad’s father taught shape-note singing during “gospel meetings.” All singing was a cappella (without instrumental accompaniment) and people were expected to sing in four-part harmony. Everyone in my family could sing parts, and we often sang together in church or just for fun.

During my third-grade year we got a piano, which Dad had accepted as barter payment for a car at his Ford dealership. Two of my sisters began piano lessons but stopped after two months when their teacher quit because of her pregnancy. When I was in sixth grade, I heard a friend play a piano piece in a minor key that resonated deeply with me, and I wanted to learn to play it. My dad was opposed to the idea of a boy, especially *his* son, taking piano lessons and refused to pay for them. So that summer, I mowed a neighbor’s lawn for

\$1.25 each week to pay for my own lessons. This was the first of several choices that defied conventional expectations. After the summer was over, my mom paid for the lessons. At the end of one year of study, my piano teacher moved away, so I stopped taking lessons but continued to play on my own.

When it came time to go to college, I didn't know which career path to pursue. My skills and interests were broad—I was good in math and considered a career in medicine—but in my heart I wanted to study music. Following in the path of my siblings before me, I enrolled at Harding College. Although I had very little formal musical training, I began as a music major because I played clarinet and piano as well as anyone in my little town. I didn't consider voice my primary instrument because all my siblings sang, and I did not think my singing talent was special.

At the end of my first year, Dad threatened to cut off my funding if I didn't change my major to something more practical. A fierce argument ensued after which I decided to major in both music and math. Calculus homework, however, was incredibly time-consuming and detracted from my music practice, so I dropped the math major halfway through the year. Choosing to major exclusively in music was another pivotal moment for me, challenging cultural norms and my dad's threats to follow my heart.

Parallel to my pursuit of music, I also began a quest for a more authentic faith. I had always been a "good little boy," obeying all the rules without argument or question. In the summer after my freshman year, I toured Europe for ten weeks with my college chorus. That experience opened my eyes and my mind to a whole new world, particularly when a chorus alumna challenged me to read the Bible to see what it truly said and not just to find evidence in it to prove my religion was correct.

During the next year I began to read the Bible simply to see what it said—something I had never done before. Through that pursuit of truth I came to the ultimate question: Did I believe in the existence of God? Because His existence couldn't be proven, I decided to live existentially—to indulge any passion, feeling, desire, or compulsion without regard for reward or punishment. The next twenty-four hours were the most painful and tormented of my life.

Emerging from that test of faith, I began to reconstruct my beliefs, not according to the teachings of my church or culture but according to what I believed deep down to be true, based on what I read in the Bible. In effect, I created a religion of my own, which externally didn't look very different from the one in which I was raised, but internally was totally new. I developed a set of beliefs for which I took full responsibility. That process continues for me to this day.

It seems that I was programmed for this pursuit of authenticity: evaluating the information provided by society, education, family, church, and my community, sifting through it, throwing out portions, and creating something that seemed true to me. It was this same process by which I developed techniques for teaching singing.

I married Carol Mannen, a great musician and pianist in her own right, during our senior year of college. We agreed that because we were musicians, we would probably never be wealthy. My career goal was to teach college music classes—theory, conducting, and singing were all interesting to me. I decided to pursue graduate work in voice because that degree program appeared more interesting than theory or conducting. Out of naiveté and lack of proper counsel, I applied *only* to Indiana University and was not accepted. So we made plans to move back to my hometown and work for my dad with an eye to eventually taking over his business. Recognizing my musical and singing talents, my college piano teacher and her singer/doctor husband (Neva and Bill White) intervened and convinced us that this move might be a big mistake. Bill took me to his alma mater (the University of Arkansas) and introduced me to his former teacher, Richard Brothers, under whom I earned my master's degree.

I never really intended to pursue a career in performing, but I realized that to get a college teaching position, I needed performing experience. That practical need was my main impetus for pursuing a performing career. However, the same year I earned my master's degree, I was hired as a one-year replacement for the choir director at Oklahoma Christian College. While there, Carol and I did a lot of performing for college development functions, banquets and so forth, and the college administration appreciated us so much that they created a faculty position to keep me there. Besides teaching voice lessons, I produced and directed musicals and operas, taught music theory, sight-singing, keyboard harmony, ear training, and all the vocal music education classes. I stayed there eleven years.

During my first year in Oklahoma, I became interested in the work of a famous voice teacher, the late Inez Lunsford Silberg, who taught at Oklahoma City University. Several of her current and former students were building successful international opera careers at the time, and I was curious about her teaching style and technique. I began studying with Mrs. Silberg and with her encouragement, I enrolled at OCU for a second master's degree in opera performance. She used abstract imagery almost exclusively to convey the kind of sound she wanted me to produce, and I was able to intuit what I needed to do physically and mentally to make the sound happen. She and I developed a

strong connection because I was able to apply the ideas she gave me. I credit her with teaching me what a great sound should be.

While I was studying with Mrs. Silberg, several of the singers in her studio seemed frustrated because they didn't understand her imagery and abstract concepts. So after a performance class where singers seemed to be confused, I would approach them and explain in more practical, physical terms what I thought she meant. In that way, I began to help my colleagues move forward in their technical progress. Although I honor Mrs. Silberg for what she taught me, I developed my own teaching style and vocal technique, which were very different from those I learned from any other teacher.

I won some competitions, and at the age of thirty-two I had an apprenticeship at Des Moines Metro Opera. That summer I realized I probably could have an operatic singing career, but I wasn't as compelled to sing as the other apprentices were. I decided that the world would be no worse off if I didn't have a singing career, but it might be worse off if I didn't teach. I also had two young daughters and a wife I wanted to support, and the lifestyle of the itinerant singer was not appealing. Furthermore, I didn't need to pursue a performing career to get a college teaching job—I already had one. After that summer I never again pursued a career in performance, even though I have continued to perform in the occasional opera, concert, or recital. In contrast to many singing teachers who have had successful performing careers, I consciously and willingly chose to devote my career to teaching rather than to performing.

I taught voice lessons and performed at Inspiration Point Fine Arts Colony (now called Opera in the Ozarks) in the summer of 1985. At that time, it became clear to me that training people for professional careers in opera and musicals was my passion. In pursuing this more focused teaching field, I was hired as chair of the Voice Department at the St. Louis Conservatory, which closed after my third year there. I then took a job at the University of Houston, where I also taught voice for the Houston Grand Opera Studio. My work there led to a position at the Aspen Music Festival and School, and the Aspen connection led to my current position at Juilliard. Along the way, I gradually developed an approach for teaching singing that was unique to me. In each position, I attempted to do my best and be true to myself.

The current flowing through my story has been a pursuit of authenticity. The story is not a model for anyone else to follow—it is simply *my* story. My goal in teaching voice is to help people write their own authentic stories—to find their voices and themselves, not by pretending to be something different than what they are but by being themselves—fully, truly, and openly.

And the pursuit is not over.