

HEAD FIRST



The Language of the Head Voice: A Concise Study of
Learning to Sing in the Head Voice

DENES STRINY

Foreword by BIRGIT NILSSON

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in the Head Voice*

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Dedication In Remembrance

On the morning of January 6th at my apartment in New York City, I had just finished a phone conversation with my editor Bruce Burch about my book *Head First: The Language of the Head Voice*. We both felt the book was nearing completion as we discussed the front and back cover. I had received, four days earlier, the finished digital picture that I wanted for the front cover. I had found that picture at the Metropolitan Opera Guild Office who gave permission for its use and formatted the picture for the dimensions of the revised book. The picture was that of Birgit Nilsson and Franco Corelli in a 1967 production of *Turandot*, a performance I attended while still in college. She had on that incredible head dress; the picture had it all.

I remember my first image of Birgit Nilsson while in high school from an old *Ed Sullivan Show*. She sang "*In questa reggia*" from Act II of *Turandot*. I had never heard an opera at this time and sat before the old black and white TV set stunned by the sound that she made with her voice—it was huge, exciting, beautiful, and bewildering. How did she do this? She was wearing a white, maybe taffeta dress, tightly fitted, and was standing in front of a trellis filled with roses. If there were any tension in her body one certainly would have seen it; but there was none. I didn't know anything about what I had just seen, but at that moment I knew I wanted to be a part of it. I followed Birgit's performances from the 60's to the end of her career.

In 1987, after a 17 performance run of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* in Great Britain, singing my first Wagnerian role—Walther—I received a phone call from my best friend Michael Cordovana at The Catholic University of America in Washington, DC. Mike asked me if I would like to sing for Birgit Nilsson; he was bringing her to the university for a Master Class. I, of course, said "yes," it was a chance to meet and sing for the woman who had such a profound influence on me.

A month later I was in DC and had my first private lesson with her. There was another bond I had with Birgit. Only three weeks earlier I discovered through Catholic Charities in St. Paul, Minnesota (I'm an adopted kid) that my heritage was not German/Austrian, as I for many years had been told, but Swedish—on both sides. So when I met the great Birgit Nilsson for the first

time, I felt that we had known each other forever. She responded quite personally. We laughed, joked, and kidded with each other and made some wonderful music for three days during that Master Class. She invited me to come to Buckaburg, Germany, that October where she was giving a month-long series of classes. I worked with her again privately and within the classes—often six hours a day, six days a week. We'd have breakfast together each morning and many times dinner; she wanted to teach me how to be Swedish, although she would tell me she thought there was a touch of Finnish in me, also.

This time with her was like a dream. We would work on German together in the evenings until she told me that I finally was speaking *Hoch Deutsch*. The main point that characterized our sessions was laughter, jokes, and mutual respect. We both had a tremendous respect for each other. Her knowledge and insight were unparalleled.

One morning after singing at a party given by the Count at the castle where we were staying (along with 600 of his closest friends), I arrived at breakfast to work with Birgit as usual, but she said frantically to me, "You do not have time to have breakfast; you have a lot of driving to do to get to Bayreuth by tomorrow morning. I spoke to Wieland last night and he wants to hear you tomorrow!" She had personally arranged for a private audition at the *Festspiele Haus* with one of the great Wagnerian directors.

I was thrilled; I was ecstatic; this really was a dream! Walking into the *Festspiele Haus*, I was told to report to the Bursar's Office to get my check; I had no idea what they were talking about and only later understood they were paying me to sing an audition. I was still awe-struck as I stood center stage with the set of *Siegfried* behind me, one light shining down front center with only Wolfgang Wagner as the audience in the auditorium. He wanted to hear the complete role of Siegmund from *Die Walküre*. What fun! What excitement! That was a moment I'll never forget. I owe that experience and many more to Birgit Nilsson.

For the next two years I worked with Birgit whenever she came to New York City; she would always give me a call when she came into town. I remember one call from her in 1993. She was coming to town to do a Master Class and also to participate in a 350th celebration of the Swedes landing in America. She asked if I would drive her down to the festivities—a big dinner with the King and Queen of Sweden at the Hotel Dupont in Wilmington, Delaware, and be her escort for the event.

We drove down; as Birgit would say, "What a hoot!" At 1 o'clock in the morning we left to return to New York City, laughing and talking non-stop. Suddenly I noticed we were surrounded by cornfields and complete darkness; I had confused the Jersey Turnpike with Interstate 95, and we were quite lost. There were no gas stations, no houses, and no lights. I couldn't believe it—lost in a cornfield with Birgit Nilsson! We had to drive around quite awhile before finding someone who could get us back on the path to New York City. We didn't really mind; we were able to enjoy the dilemma together, and it deepened our friendship and respect.

In 2001 I founded and was the Artistic Director for Shaker Mountain Opera at the Koussevitsky Arts Center in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Birgit consented to be the Honorary Chair of the Festival. We opened with an amazing performance of *Die Walküre* which I conducted with the Albany Symphony Orchestra. The following year we went on to perform *Götterdämmerung*. All of this was inspired by this amazing friend and incredible force of nature. I'd send her tapes of all the performances and would always receive a very gracious response with a critique.

I hadn't intended these personal stories to appear in this book, but on that morning of January 6, 2006, something else happened. I heard that Birgit Nilsson had died. It is very hard to envision a world without Birgit. Her friendship gave me the strength to realize whatever potential exists in me. The battles she had with her voice as a beginning singer and with her early career showed me what kind of person it takes to accomplish "this thing" called music on a high level. I will always remember Birgit and will always be deeply indebted to her.

I've decided also to scatter some memorabilia of Birgit throughout the book because our mutual understanding and corroboration of this phenomenon called the Head Voice permeated both our lives. I came to her with my knowledge, understanding, and talent, but needed to hear "Yes, go for it." Birgit provided the approval which gave me confidence. The hours we spent at the keyboard where she would pick out an exercise on the piano, making up some words on the spot to go with the notes, and vocalize me while drinking coffee and eating pastries in a castle in Germany are unforgettable.

Denes Striny
New York, NY
January 2006

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The illustrations on pages xii, 12, 40, and 106 were drawn by Jose Manuel Sossa.

COMPANION CD FOR THE BOOK HEAD-FIRST: The Language of the Head Voice

The Evolution of Denes Striny's Voice: 18 years old to present

Track

- | | |
|--|-------|
| 1. Aria from <i>La Perichole</i> (18 years old; the next year my voice teacher had me singing baritone), 1964 | 2:57 |
| 2. Grieg Song (Five years later as a bass-baritone), 1969 | 2:31 |
| 3. Grieg Song (Same period), 1970 | 2:10 |
| 4. Ravel Song (One year later), 1970 | 1:37 |
| 5. Aria from <i>La Boheme</i> (One year later reworking myself with Music-Minus-One), 1971 | 4:07 |
| 6. <i>Ariadne auf Naxos</i> (One year later, still by myself), 1971 | :55 |
| 7. <i>Saint of Bleecker Street</i> (Break in tape; still by myself singing with Wolf Trap Co., after which I moved to New York City), 1974 | 3:15 |
| 8. <i>Madama Butterfly</i> (Still no teacher; one year later in New York, singing with Dallas Opera, Washington Opera, Providence Opera, Goldovsky Opera, and many concerts), 1975 | 1:23 |
| 9. <i>Madama Butterfly</i> (New teacher now for five years, no quality left in voice, Washington, DC), 1981 | 1:10 |
| 10. <i>Don Carlo</i> Aria (Carlo Bergonzi, Eugene Kohn, Piano) This was the turning point. I realized that I could not sing [u] and [o] and that this affected my complete voice and complete vocal technique, 1983 | 9:15 |
| 11. <i>La Fanciulla del West</i> Excerpts in performance (after reworking one year by myself), 1984 | 8:19 |
| 12. <i>Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg</i> Coaching with Birgit Nilsson (Germany; taped for Swedish TV), 1985 | 3:15 |
| 13. <i>Die Walküre</i> Coaching with Birgit Nilsson (Germany; for Swedish TV), 1985 | 12:42 |
| 14. <i>Winterstürmme</i> Party honoring Birgit in Germany, 1985 | 3:12 |
| 15. <i>Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg</i> in performance (Leeds, Great Britain), 1986 | 4:57 |
| 16. <i>Norma</i> Aria in performance (St. Paul, MN), 1991 | 5:05 |
| 17. <i>Otello</i> Aria in concert (New York City), 1992 | :55 |
| 18. <i>Turandot</i> Aria in concert, 1992 | 2:37 |

[This was the end of the battle for me. I was tired of fighting my own voice, and felt that over the 28 tears I had made a pretty good stab at it. I sang with many great singers and conductors (Miriam Gauci, Maria Ewing, Justino Diaz, Malcolm Smith, Martina Arroyo, Leyla Gencer, Beverly Sills, Tatiana Troyanos, Antonio Ordonez, Yoko Watanabe, Debra Riedel, Sarah Brightman, George Manahan, Mstislav Rostropovich, Nicola Rescigno, Jacque Dellacote, and many others). I was very proud of what I had accomplished, but it could have been more fun along the way.]

HEAD FIRST:

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Foreword

A Letter from Birgit Nilsson

July 4, 1996

Dear Denes,

Wow! I must say that you have done a fabulous job, and I am full of admiration. You also seem to be a first class physician. Where have you learned everything?

As I mentioned to you earlier, I don't feel my English is good enough to write a complete chapter for your book. But I do have a few things to say. Ha!

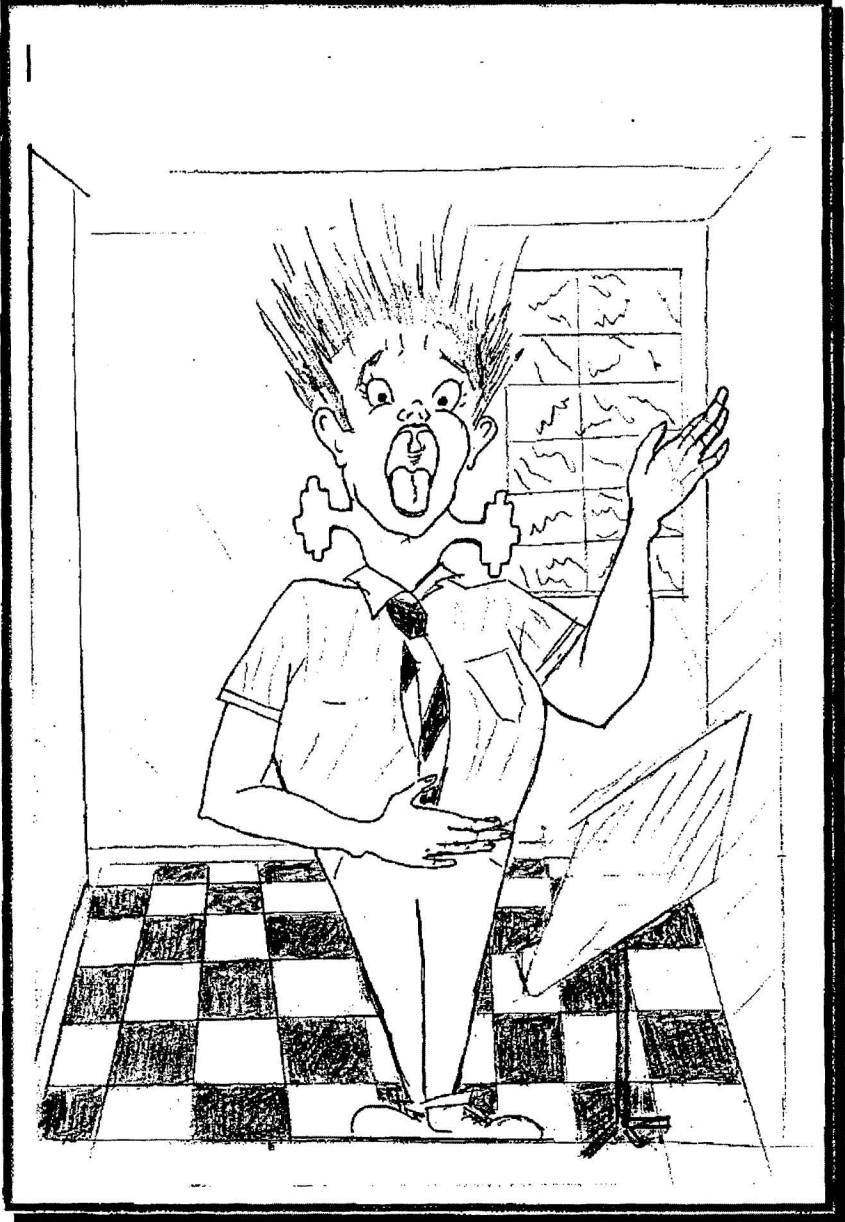
As you know, I always speak about the two pools: the high placement in the forehead, and the low support. Some come by the feeling of low support when they get an idea of high placement of tone. For it is then that everything falls into the right place: the larynx, the pharynx, the tongue, etc. The **vocal cords will be released from the press**, and at that point the tone gets another dimension, much more beautiful, because then **our whole body becomes the instrument**.

Singing in this way is like a fountain with a plastic ball on the top which floats wonderfully on the water stream. **The body should nowhere be hard or constricted but elastic**. It takes time to develop this. For me it took almost ten years to relax my overworked vocal cords. Therefore, the sooner a student learns how the body is functioning, the better!

As you write in your book: "Great singers usually talk only about breath, because that is all they feel." This is exactly why they **are** great singers.

Continued success with your teaching and your book. I think it is a great work. Take care and much love.

Fondly,
Birgit



Preface

It is not possible to write about vocal history in a vacuum. No matter how much teachers and students of voice may wish to avoid contaminating their understanding of the past with new values in the present, they cannot ignore the fact that both writer and reader are inevitably affected by the assumptions and beliefs that have been passed down. Many of the issues addressed in this book as problems are viewed today as “givens,” not to be rethought. It would be impossible to present a persuasive argument for the significance of such issues without examining, at some length, the genesis of the issues and the widespread preconceptions regarding causations.

The mission of this book is two-fold. Firstly, to engage the reader in a new way of thinking whereby one starts to realize that the sound of a singing or speaking voice has to do with how one uses his or her voice. HOW one speaks or sings. The accompanying CD of the Author’s voice shows that when you change the way that you sing—you change the sound that you sing. **Cause and Effect!** Leontyne Price, Robert Merrill, Christa Ludwig, Nicolai Ghiaurov, Rene Pape, Franco Corelli, Joan Sutherland, Ruth Ann Swenson, and Luciano Pavarotti all sing in a certain way, creating a certain sound. We, as listeners, tend to compartmentalize this achievement in a category called “Of course it’s great singing—it’s Leontyne, Birgit, Jussi. . . .” So now we the listeners don’t have to feel bad about not being able to create this same kind of sound. “God just didn’t give me the voice” should be changed to “I wish I sang in the way that Leontyne sings!”

The second half of the mission is to be as concise as possible in explaining “TEXTURE.” Texture is the sound that is fed by breath to convey the voice. We all have many textures we can use. Some textures are open, some are tight, and some almost closed (causing the battle with the breath because the respiratory system is in a fight to stay open). However, there is one texture, and only one, that is completely open, therefore, totally free. This is the texture of great singing—not good or real good, *but great!* It is the texture that does not tighten the valve (larynx) and cause closure and a muscular battle with the breath. This “great singer” texture is very specific because it bypasses overt muscular involvement and is seemingly an “out of body experience” for the doer. This phenomenon cannot be explained to anyone who has not experienced it. In discussing this topic, we have a terminology problem. The words mean different things to people who have not had the experience. When great singers tell us what they feel when they sing, they are telling us the whole story. We however, only can

grasp it to the degree that we can do it (sing in that way). **Cause and Effect.** If we do not sing in that way, we can not feel those sensations and, therefore, we cannot make those sounds.

This book will lead singers into a new way of listening, learning, doing, feeling, and sounding. It is a wonderful journey to take and will assist them in finding their "Total Vocal Potential." They will own it; they will understand it; but, unfortunately, they will not be able to converse on any real level with others who do not sing in this way. So, when asked, "How do you make that sound?" you too will say, "It was a gift from God. I don't know why He chose me, but I am glad that He did."

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank several people who were instrumental in this book being written. Bruce Burch my editor who worked doggedly to have the English Language served in this work. Having a rather casual style myself, and a rather emotional commitment to the subject matter, along with a sense of humor—Mr. Burch definitely had his hands full. Ellwood Annaheim has been working closely with my Publisher to meet the guidelines required to format this book—an intensely tedious job, to which he has brought skill and knowledge. My good friend John Balkema offered to do a complete reading as an interested bystander. John being very smart and a librarian certainly helped. I really think that he wanted to take a voice lesson after he had finished. Michael Cordovana, my mentor and dear friend for 40 years, who read rewrite after rewrite and kept telling me that there was nothing like this out there to read for voice students and professional singers in trouble with their singing. His encouragement meant everything. And lastly Marcella Calabi—a student of mine for years with a beautiful soprano voice and the mind and musicality to go along with it, who prodded me to keep going through her research and wonderful conversation on whatever subject was current in the manuscript. Marcella put the book in its first format—a format that made me very excited about a fast completion date.

Denes Striny

Introduction

Singers and How They Get That Way

“Where have all the head voices gone?”

Christa Ludwig (New York Master Class, January 1997)

In January 1997, I had the wonderful fortune of attending a master class taught by the great soprano Christa Ludwig. Twelve of the best voice teachers of Manhattan had each sent their best student to participate in the class and benefit directly from Christa’s experience and insights on the human voice. After hearing the twelve students she asked one question, really a condemnation of vocal instruction today. She asked, “Where have all the head voices gone?”

This is the premise and impetus of this book. The HEAD VOICE isn’t truly understood by today’s vocal performer or his or her teacher and coach. It is fast becoming a lost art. This book is my explanation of the Head Voice and how to sing using its beautiful, effortless, and unconstricted style. It is my journey through wrong techniques and lengthy recovery to arrive at the true understanding of what it means to sing in the Head Voice. Only the great singers like Christa Ludwig, Birgit Nilsson, Kiri Te Kanawa, Jussi Bjoerling, Joan Sutherland, Leontyne Price, Luciano Pavarotti, and a handful of others sing in this voice. They are becoming a rarity among the new breed of performer who either rejects the texture of Head Voice or doesn’t really understand how to achieve the velvety, full-voiced sound.

Do some singers just “have it” and others don’t? My answer is a resounding **NO!** Luciano Pavarotti, Birgit Nilsson, Monserrat Caballe, Kiri Te Kanawa, Joan Sutherland, and Leontyne Price are not phenomenal singers from another planet. Neither were Jussi Bjoerling, Robert Merrill, Leonard Warren, Zinka Milanov, and Fiorenza Cossotto. In fact, the physical difference between great opera singers and the rest of us is **nil!**

My theory about this subject called singing originates with the day we are born. As infants, we come into the world crying, announcing that we are here