



Sing Healthily and Consciously: The Dilaton (Diaphragm, Larynx, and Tongue) Method and Its Application in Classical Singing and Teaching

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I. Introduction.

Classical singers are generally taught that the tongue should lie relaxed behind the lower teeth and the larynx should be free. However, if misunderstood, this teaching approach can be detrimental to a singing student. The word relaxed is often understood as flabby, which is not correct and can be very misleading. Only a muscle that works, properly relaxes.

To discuss this problem, I have developed the Dilaton (diaphragm, larynx, tongue) Method. It is a singing teaching method based on the proper physical function of the tongue and larynx both in breathing and in forming vowels. From this point of view, it can be understood, how voice, breath and muscles work together in a balanced and healthy way. Good posture, support, and airflow will be achieved as a result.

I examine how professional classical singers have experienced the method in the process of learning how to sing. I used twelve open-ended interviews, in which the singers describe their progress both before and after the use of the method. According to the preliminary results of the data-driven analysis the subjects have experienced an improved, in some cases even decisive, physical understanding and conscious control of their singing instruments.

A healthy and conscious singing technique is the goal of all professional singers. The conclusion can be drawn, that the concrete teaching of the work of the tongue and larynx is an effective way to achieve this goal: how to get a balanced and healthy way of singing.

II. The Dilaton Method

When I started to study classical singing my dream was to become an opera soloist. However, I couldn't achieve this goal, because of my technical difficulties in singing, for which I couldn't get sufficient help from any of my teachers during my studies. No one of them succeeded in solving my basic problem that was my collapsed tongue and larynx.¹ This unsolved physical problem caused not only that I couldn't progress enough to achieve my goal, but I also got hoarse very easily when I sang. That is why I started to research the physically right way of singing and gradually developed my own very concrete singing teaching method, which helps the student to physically understand and consciously control the process to produce the singing voice and to achieve a balanced, healthy, and professional way of singing.

Classical singers are generally and traditionally taught that the tongue should lie relaxed behind the lower teeth and the larynx should be free. However, if misunderstood, this teaching approach can be detrimental to a singing student. The word relaxed is often understood as flabby, which is not correct and can be very misleading. These words free and relaxed are very often taken for granted as if a student automatically could understand the meaning of them. But only a muscle, that works, properly relaxes. Very often in classical singing teaching it is said that you ought to sing as if you hadn't any tongue and larynx at all.

To discuss this problem, I have developed the Dilaton Method. It is a vocal teaching method based on the proper physical function of the tongue and larynx both in breathing and in forming vowels. If the tongue-larynx mechanism doesn't work properly the sufficient breathing contact between the voice and the body will not be realized. This lack of sufficient contact will be the cause of, and at the root of, all future difficulties in singing and will prevent any real development of a student.

The word "Dilaton" is composed from the words diaphragm, larynx and tongue and it describes the whole mechanism used whilst singing, which I call the breathing pump. The work of this pump is the central idea of the method. In this breathing pump the work of the tongue is the compelling force. According to the Dilaton Method, the sufficient work of the diaphragm whilst singing is the result of the proper work of the tongue-larynx mechanism.²

Within the Dilaton Method it is essential that the tongue, if sunk in the throat, be moved upwards and forwards to its right position, so that both the larynx and the diaphragm can hang freely. If you try to lower the larynx which is collapsed the result will be darkening of the sound.

Having lifted the tongue, and therefore larynx to their desirable position, the air passage will be freed for the voice. It will now be possible to sing so that the air comes through the vent of the vocal folds against the resistance of the inbreath. The air is in fact pumped out and there will be a sensation of counter-pressure. As a result of this correct exhalation there is also a sensation of a particular kind of relaxation in the muscles that can be seen and felt clearly and that functions as a good control of correct exhalation needed whilst singing. The internal suspension or hanging of the breathing pump so, that the tongue is in the right position in relation to the soft palate and doesn't fill the throat leads to the physical understanding of both the kind of deep inbreath and controlled outbreath, that is required in classical singing and that is the absolute prerequisite to learn how to sing. Moreover, the tongue must be trained to pronounce the vowels properly. All this requires hard physical work and cannot be described with the word relaxed, at least not at the beginning of the studies. If the tongue and larynx are collapsed it is impossible to understand the physical meaning of the words free, relaxed, and open which are generally used, when speaking about tongue and larynx.

To create the contact between the voice and the body whilst singing, the sound and the air must meet in the glottis where vowels are formed. Vowels are formed in the glottis, and they are pronounced with the tongue.³ To be free and able to pronounce balanced vowels the tongue muscle cannot be sunk in the throat but must have correct and sufficient strong contact both to the soft palate and to the larynx.

As a result of this simple but very concrete and strong physical correction, that is the lifting of the breathing pump and the training of the work of the tongue-larynx mechanism, it is possible to consciously control the position and opening of the larynx as well as closing the vocal folds and to control the airflow through them against the resistance of the inbreath. As a result, the tongue, larynx, and diaphragm work now properly and the natural consequence of this is the right and understandable breathing contact in singing. The muscles of the body begin to work because of the correct work of the breathing pump. Body contact whilst singing is not only the work of the muscles of the back and the lower back, of the abdominal muscles and the muscles of the ribcage. A singer must also get contact to the muscles of the upper breast, neck, face, and head, not to mention the jaw. The whole body is involved. Even the work of the lips will become understandable through the sufficient breathing contact. This breathing contact will not be created through external muscle work, which prevents the natural muscle reactions of the body whilst singing, but to create the right and sufficient breathing contact it is necessary to learn to initiate the breathing in the glottis vent with the help of the tongue so, that the sufficient contact between air and sound will at all be created. The posture of a singer gets straighter, still relaxed, through singing from inside out, not by forcing from outside. When a singer's voice production is correct the result will be a good posture as the muscles through singing begin to work and reach little by little an equilibrium. The whole skeleton of a singer can be straightened through this proper work of the muscles. Clear articulation, legato, support, space, the placement of the voice in the right way, the direction of the voice etc. and all in all the healthy balance of the singing and the body will be physically understandable and consciously controllable things, possible to learn and to teach.

The Dilaton Method promotes an active state of elastic being, which can be reached, in simple terms, through learning how to breathe properly. The control of the breathing will be achieved when the vent in the glottis is under control. It is most important that the breathing pump is first lifted and stretched through inhalation. During exhalation muscles will be balanced and the spine gets straight. If the tongue muscle and larynx, along the rest of the body, are in a balanced working order, the body will feel and appear relaxed although in hard work.

III. The Interview Research of Twelve Professional Singers Concerning Their Experiences with the Dilaton Method.

Since 2006, I have had also professional singers as my singing students. They had the same experience as me, that despite studying singing for many years, even for many decades, they still

didn't have that kind of physical understanding and conscious control over their own singing instruments as they would have liked to have. I then decided to examine, what kind of problems these professional singers had with their voices and how they, after studied with me, experienced my method.

Twelve professional singers participated in this research, which can be considered methodologically as action research. They all had studied singing for several years, even for decades, and they had experience of many teachers and teaching styles. Ten participants had professional singer's degree from university or from university of applied sciences, one participant didn't have a degree but was working as a singer and one participant was still studying to become a singing teacher.

I used twelve open-ended semi-structured interviews of 3–4 hours each. I also had my own notes of the participants' development during their singing lessons with me during many years. Moreover, I had got material of the participants in form of answers to my written questions. Some participants had also on their own initiative given notes of their technical findings during their development.

I was especially interested in how the participants experienced the work of the tongue muscle and the larynx whilst developing their singing technique with me and how they had used these organs in singing before. I was interested in, how they, before knowing The Dilaton Method, had understood the breathing, articulation, breathing contact, support, legato, voice placement etc. that is, how they had understood those traditional dogmas of singing teaching, that all singers at least as ideas know and how they understand them now.

According to the data-driven analysis the participants had experienced following problems in their singing before working with me: the voice got easily tired, they were unable to sing high notes, the middle of the voice was weak, they couldn't always rely on their instruments, the success was haphazard, they didn't feel that singing was physically comfortable, they knew, that something was missing and the results were not good enough to achieve what they wanted and all in all they hadn't any clear conscious system in their singing, These were also the reasons why they had sought help by me.

According to the analysis as preliminary results can be stated, that the participants have experienced The Dilaton Method very helpful, even decisive, to their development. They experienced that this teaching approach was very logic, even if it had not been quite simple to adopt. The traditional teaching of the relaxed tongue and larynx was very well known to all participants and to learn to use their tongue-larynx mechanism in a concrete way was hard work to all of them. One participant for example described that her tongue-larynx mechanism was like paralyzed before she began to feel and control the work of it.

All participants said that they have got new concrete tools to solve their problems with singing. They have also begun to think singing in a much more concrete and conscious way than before. Many participants say that the voice doesn't get tired as easily as before. The high notes and the middle of the voice have become much better. Some participants mentioned also that their self-esteem has become better and that they can also control their nerves better than before.

A healthy and conscious singing technique is the goal for all professional singers. The preliminary conclusion of my research shows that the physical problem of the collapsed larynx and tongue may be quite common and that the concrete teaching of the work of the tongue-larynx mechanism, which is essential teaching of the Dilaton Method can lead to the right understanding of the balanced and healthy work of these organs and because of this to achieve a conscious, physically understandable, balanced, and healthy way of singing.

I am, however, aware that this research, where the developer of the method, the teacher of the method and the researcher is the same person can be considered subjective. Still, I think that this kind of research can give valuable knowledge about the long-term singing technical experiences of professional singers and thus be of great help to younger singing students.

¹ F. Husler and Y. Rodd-Marling, *Singen; Die physische Natur des Stimmorganes. Anleitung zum Aufschließen der Singstimme*. (Mainz: Schott Musikpädagogig, 1965), 54.

² I. Mayerhofer, "...und der Kehlkopf bewegt sich doch!" oder was das Singen wirklich ist—die Urfunktion des richtigen singens! (Wien: Verlag Bruder Hollinek, 1987), 42.

³ H. Coblenzer, and F. Muhar, *Atem und Stimme. Anleitung zum guten Sprechen*. 17. Auflage. (Wien: ÖBV Pädagogischer Verlag, 1997), 85.