

## **Teaching Philosophy of Matthew Shepard Smith**

In my years of teaching, I've continually worked toward a comprehensive understanding of my own vocal process and that of my students. It's a never ending pursuit. All of us are physically unique and learn and absorb information differently and therefore process and implement ideas and techniques at varied rates. The philosophies I've studied and respected call for a comprehensive understanding of the science and anatomy of singing, with which I completely agree. But the application of these indisputable facts can be tricky. Some students welcome the intellectual/scientific approach with eager curiosity. But others go blank at the mere mention of formants and harmonics. So the implementation of the science may be simplified into mere catch phrases and universal manipulations of space with the hope that the student will walk away with a basic understanding of function through simple and quickly applied tricks (lip trill, raspberry, v-buzz, standing wave, nasal pinch, etc). These are all very effective, but what do they do? Why do they change the resonance? How does it change the shape of the vocal tract, and how do we make the adjustments without these tricks? There lies the challenge: to help them implement a sustainable vocal strategy regardless of their learning style.

### **Formant Tuning**

The greatest success I've found in my teaching and my own singing has been through the most comprehensive understanding of how I shape my vocal tract. Assuming there is consistent airflow along with an activated soft palate, it is how I/we shape the vocal tract that determines the aesthetic of resonance and management of sub glottal pressure. This means understanding formants and our own speech process. Therefore Formant Tuning.

First I identify speech patterns in the singer: which vowels promote soft palate activation and tongue and jaw release; and which vowels do the opposite. This takes time. It means methodically observing their instinctual vocal function through varied speech and singing exercises. Colloquialisms are a main indicator. A young woman from Texas would tend to have a predominant [æ] formant setup, therefore, having a tendency to belt or mix everything. Whereas, a young woman from Minnesota with a predominant [o] formant setup will be more prone to sing in head voice or light mix. My job is to identify these tendencies, make them aware of them and guide them through the appropriate adjustments. For the sake of brevity and being concise, I am leaving out specific case examples. But I would gladly provide these upon request.

## **Making Intention Match Vocal Function**

Isolating function in the studio is fine, but what happens when they sing in a performance class or production? How they 'act' affects their formant setup and airflow. Acting/intention MUST be part of the process. Intention must support function and function must support intention. If one impedes the other, then we need to work to align them. If a young man's instinctual way of expressing anger is to collapse his chest, flex his arms, crane his neck and scream with his mouth open wide, he'll more than likely transfer those instincts directly to his singing. He probably couldn't make it to the end of 'The Falcon and the Dive' from *The Scarlet Pimpernel* by Frank Wildhorn. His voice will give out on him before the bridge. He'll have to redefine his way of expressing that anger. This takes time, but is incredibly rewarding. Once that anger is associated with proper vocal function, it will guarantee sustainability regardless of how intent he becomes in performance. This works with all intentions. We keep the good ones and adjust the bad ones.

Though I have briefly stated my teaching philosophy, there is much more nuance and detail to what I have expressed above. The world of the Arts is so expansive, diverse and inclusive. I am constantly learning, adapting and growing as a teacher and artist. I eagerly work to expand my skills, knowledge and experience in the world of Education, Acting, Music, Theatre and the Performing Arts. I conscientiously apply all I learn from my colleagues, my teaching, and my personal professional performing experiences to my own craft and to the instruction I give my students with great success. In the end, it's a continual collaboration.