

Consider the Swan's Neck If You Would Sing Well

Slender-Necked Persons Incapable of Producing Rich Tones—
Famous Singers Have Necks of Large Proportions—
Beware of the Tight Collar

By DENISON FISH

THE musical world is full of voice teachers who keep reiterating that voice is mind or breath or some intangible thing—teachers who point out that Garcia admitted at the end of his career that his use of the laryngoscope profited him nothing in his search for a short cut to a knowledge of vocal development and who argue from this that the less said about the mechanical aspect of voice, the better; teachers who say that when the ear hears perfectly the voice will respond perfectly to the mandate of the will for that perfect tone, and so on, *ad nauseam*.

No doubt they are nearly right—that it is better to give no thought to the mechanical part of voice during the act of singing but that the mechanical part of voice may not be thought of before or after singing is ridiculous. As well

assert that a violinist may allow some one to fill his violin box with clay and tie ribbons around the neck and play on without giving any thought to his instrument.

That there are mechanical factors in voice no one can deny, and any one possessed with even a weak desire to be scientific in his vocal study ought to have the courage to examine these factors. To the superficial observer there may appear to be more of these factors than there really are. I would hesitate a long time before venturing to give an exhaustive schedule or ultimate classification of them, but there is one mechanical feature of voice to which I am convinced too little consideration has been given—namely that of room or acoustics about and above the larynx or voice box.

If you are so intrepid as to risk thinking of your neck in connection with your voice, collect a few dozen head and

shoulder photographs of famous singers, especially profile and side views, and make some observations. Great singers' necks are broad rather than long. It is no exaggeration to say of certain singers whom I might mention, that they have no neck at all. Singers with long necks invariably have thick, wide and deep necks in proportion to the richness of the voice. It is just as reasonable that nature should insist on certain curves and lines in the neck of a singer, as it is that the violin-maker must conform to certain dimensions and proportions if he expects to make a violin and not a cello or a toy.

Measuring the Voice

Some day a "voice builder" will appear who will base his advertising, at least, on a system of neck development. He will advocate massage and exercises for the neck until it fulfills the requirements of the tapemeasure. His studio will be hung with silhouettes in profile of Caruso, Matzenauer and others, which will firmly establish the relationship between depth of neck and wealth of tone. He will demonstrate by his pupils that the straighter the line of the back of the neck from head to shoulders the greater the ease in playing on the voice instrument. He will show that the greater the measurement from the heel of the jaw on one side around the back to the neck to the heel of the jaw on the other side, the more room there will be for resonance and the more overtones in the voice. He will devise a schedule of measurements for all voices from coloratura soprano to basso, varying slightly with the height and lung capacity of the individ-

ual, and will refuse to attempt to "place" a voice, until he has space enough to place it in.

The teacher of this new school of voice development may be an extremist. In the enthusiasm of his discoveries he may think he has discovered the "whole secret of voice." He may lack the sense of proportion which would enable him to realize that he has merely learned how to dig the cellar of voice; that his work, although useful and scientific, is entirely negative, but he will get results and especially with well grounded musicians whose desire to sing came later in life.

Sacrificing Style

In the meantime without going to the extreme of founding a new "school" or acquiring any more unpleasant epithets than necessary, let us call attention to an abuse of the voice in this connection, of which too little has been said by voice teachers—namely, the wearing of tight and stiff neckwear.

The present styles for women do not present a handicap in voice cultivation, but there is no telling what a future season may bring forth. The young man, however, who, between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five wears a stiff white collar "that fits" according to the dictum of a moderately smart haberdasher, is placing a great obstacle in the way of his normal vocal growth and is not much better off than the Chinese woman who binds her feet during childhood. I have photographs of Slezak, Bonci and other singers in low and loose fitting collars, which would hardly be considered dressy, but the wearers of them can sing. One cannot have everything in life.

To have the voice sound well at thirty a man may have to sacrifice looking smart and dressy at the age of eighteen. Because it is a channel for some of the most important nerves and blood vessels of the body, the neck is a peculiarly sensitive part of us as we know from its ticklishness or might infer from the slang phrase "in the neck," but it is easy to squeeze it into a state of insensibility especially if we begin at the age of twelve, as some young men do. After spending several years in training one's neck to exist in cramped quarters, one is unable to tell whether a collar is tight or not. A collar may not feel tight and yet be a positive hindrance to health and vocal development. I have seen scores of young boys running risks of serious impairment to voice or positive deformity by continually erring on the side of too tight rather than too loose in the matter of neckwear.

Tight-Lacing Evil

Among the causes of the dearth of first rate American tenors, I think it would be well worth while for teachers to investigate scientifically the evils of "tight lacing" about the neck. We have not heard nearly enough of the matter. A youth wearing a collar just the least little bit too tight for ten years may mold his neck into such a size and shape that his vocal apparatus cannot work easily, naturally or with the best effect.

One of the best vocal teachers I have ever known, a pupil of Garcia and an opera singer, used to keep calling on his pupils for more room in the throat, saying, "The tone is there but your pipes are not open and it can't get out."

Teachers bewail "throat stiffness" as the greatest obstacle to good singing and recognize that it flourishes more among men than women. If the will forces the vocal cords beyond their strength, nature resists this inroad by stiffening or bracing the larger muscles of the throat, but this does not account for all the throat stiffness teachers encounter. Much of it has been acquired by keeping the neck not wisely but too well dressed.

Besides wearing looser lower collars, there is another practice which the would-be singer may adopt with profit to his neck conditions—sleeping entirely without a pillow. Physicians frequently advise patients of all sorts to do so. It is extremely uncomfortable for some to acquire this habit but when one has once learned to sleep without a pillow the added comfort to the neck, and the extra cubic inches of lung capacity, will keep him from ever returning to his former way.

The question of massage and special exercises for the development of the neck, I must leave to the physician-voice specialist. It seems to me that the matter deserves investigation, but no doubt arguments could be raised against it, and I am not possessed of sufficient scientific knowledge to give advice on the matter. There can be no doubt however that singers who have reason to believe their necks are deformed would do well to visit a first-class osteopath.

In conclusion, consider the swan. His neck is long and very thin and when at last his imprisoned soul bursts forth into song, lo! it hath killed him.

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