

Art and the Logos

Here are excerpts from soprano Antonella Banaudi's speech to the Schiller Institute conference in February. It was translated from Italian.

The title for my “expressions” is: “Education as Singing, and Singing as Education.” It will probably be more of a free digression than an orderly journey. As someone once said: Speaking of music is like dancing architecture.

I would like to recall some words that have become part of our culture and can be understood outside of any specific religion: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God.”

The “Word” does not mean a word in the strict sense that we mean it today. The Word is sound, the vibration of all that is alive, and thus means life and creation, and creation is the language of the Creator. Logos is the medium of all form. The Word is total knowledge of the absolute, beyond appearance. The Word is the word of God who names things, makes them evident, the Principle to which every person aspires. . . .

Now I do not want to enter into a sterile debate which counterposes music and words, on which of the two must serve the other. I think that a musical genius is a person who is able to reveal the soul within the envelope of the words, who can translate the secret of the poetry into the architecture of sound. And it doesn't matter how the word is treated as human language, or if it is split up, broadened, even torn apart, taking it far away from our common manner of using it.

I would like to add a reflection, maybe a hint of a reflection: Music is the intermediary between word and principle. Words without music are not poetry. Music without poetry is not the Logos. . . .

The Poetry of Art

Any type of study is a process, an enterprise of improvement. Art, however, is a process aimed at improving oneself, but not as something unconnected to reality. Art must not be used to detach oneself from reality, to find a solitary Eden of sterile and ephemeral beauty. The improvement of oneself also leads to the

improvement of what is around us.

There is no distinction between spirit and matter. They are only different levels of perception of reality. Art can unite physical reality and transcendent reality. Art puts us in contact with the Principle, with the Logos understood as reason and ratio, and what is music if not reason and relationship? It puts us in contact with what Heraclitus defined as Lightning—Fire in the sense of continuous genesis, Immanence. Music, above all, can put us into contact with Immanence, with the eternal soul that constantly re-creates itself.

In our lives we have the gift of being able to be illuminated through art and the poetry of art, of experiencing the meaning of a moment, of this cosmic breath of which we are a part. Art educates our soul, the essence that must be constantly nourished and re-created.

This search for beauty and reason is, in itself, a beautiful adventure, and it is even more beautiful to share it with other “adventurers.” Through song, we live this invaluable experience; we are instruments of ourselves. We can create the sound in each moment, and to do this, we must learn to experience it tirelessly, even with nimbleness and luminosity, vital but also black, but totally. Only by performing great music or listening to it performed by great musicians can we experience this continuous moment, even in the construction and organization of everything, in a vital tension towards the infinite.

Do you recognize the urgency, the mad drive toward aspiration, constructed and fueled moment by moment, with every sound and melodic line and harmony and color, dense and tense even in silence, until the final *Presto* of the fourth movement of [Beethoven's] Ninth Symphony?

Well then: How can I learn to live every fraction of a moment so intensely? It may seem obvious, but it can be learned by educating ourselves with practice, with patience and method, improving concentration, the capacity for interior visualization in the constant search for the best, from an aesthetic, physiological, and expressive standpoint, with the flexibility to invent and experience new paths, with a constant assimilation, but also contemporaneously with projection toward the future, ready to imagine the next moment.

The Study of Singing

Now I would like to shift to a more practical terrain, since I have to respond to the questions that have been posed to me, and which you may also have.



EIRNS/Christopher Lewis

World-renowned Italian Soprano Antonella Banaudi demonstrates her art at the Schiller conference. “The study of singing,” she said in her speech, “is a privileged form of education, because it belongs to art, and thus to a creative process.”

The study of singing is a privileged form of education, because it belongs to art, and thus to a creative process; because it belongs to music, and thus to the vibration of the Principle; and because I myself am the instrument of transmission of the secret (fortunately the great composers have given me this possibility).

And now, let us begin to educate ourselves. We start by eliminating preconceived ideas about our own voice (the greatest discoveries were made precisely because scientists were able to “forget” prior progress, and not be influenced by it, to be courageous and brazen in challenging preconceived ideas, constructing their own personal vision of the world). And so we start to do this in our own small way! When we study, we must be completely open to finding what our voice really is. Study for a certain “result,” for example, the power of sound under the illusion that we can do without the other requirements of *bel canto*, will lead to a potentially ugly voice, which nobody will want to listen to.

Pursuing agility at all costs will make us superficial and boring. I still remember how a young woman, a light soprano, wanted to impress me with a very fast performance of a famous aria. What I actually heard was a soprano that was more superficial than light. Passing over a beautiful passage at supersonic speed, only quick flashes of color remain in your memory,

which are completely insignificant.

Respect for your own voice means respect for yourself.

The attitude that we have toward it is the mirror of how we deal with ourselves. I am not only speaking of the aesthetic aspect of the voice. I am speaking of vocal personality and its artistic effectiveness, its capacity to transmit a vision with its own language, an idea, a meaning and an ideal creation that goes beyond what is evident.

Returning to the supersonic speed: In my view, in music and in art in general, the best results are achieved when you go slowly, especially at the beginning. Painting begins with the cleaning of the brushes, the preparation of the canvas, the mixture of the

colors, painting a background, some angels, the drapery of a garment; how much study was needed to paint the flesh of a face? An eye? Apart from the laws of ratio and proportion between figures, the study of light, to come to express its ... Secret, including through a hidden teaching?

Why Study Vowels?

I sense that at the beginning, some of my students are surprised at how much time I spend on the study of vowels. It is a slow process, a continuous process of listening, for the training of the inner ear, for a continuous process of exclusion of what is less beautiful, to lighten the path, to be able to choose the best, in a continuous process of experimentation, always referring to what we have found that is beautiful, because the beautiful is our guide. It is a study of the beginning, and then, the repeat of it, for each new piece that we intend to perform.

Almost nothing that is art is taught theoretically. We can only teach and experiment and choose that which takes us down the best path and the right path, the only one which reflects inner truth. A great artist is one who is able to be himself while participating in Truth, in Principle.

This is why I believe that the study of singing does

not involve an aesthetic choice, but a moral one, in the sense of truth joined with goodness and beauty.

And thus for me, through the study of vowels by the student, and the study of the student herself, we reach a balanced position to obtain a bright and lively voice, even in the darker portions, with *legato* and flexibility and agility, so that the instrument is able to partake in the idea that governs the world. The voice does not give sound to words; it gives sound to the inner meaning of a composition. Each time must be a rediscovery and re-creation, with the sense of marvel of the original sound through the Word.

Our spirits must participate in the music through the voice. And we can only do that if our technique has become transparent with musical emotion, in communion with the color of the idea. I don't much like the word "interpretation," because it could be confused with an interference that is too strong, in our partial vision of the idea expressed musically. I prefer "partaking" in the musical emotion.

At times it is very simple to change the color of a voice. I remember a calculated, ponderous, and also boring execution of "Già il sole dal Gange." Just think of a film clip of the Sun that rises over the Ganges, with its clear shine, and let yourself be taken by the movement of the music, like a boat on a wave, and immediately the quality of the sound changes, in an easier, and happier execution! This is a very simple example. I can say that until our imagination is shaped by that which the author has translated into music, we will not achieve an artistic quality of performance.

Only if we know our own nature can we educate it, improve it, strengthen it, be artists of ourselves.

Perhaps I can compare the study of singing to a sort of knowledge of the house in which we live.

At the beginning it seems that the light is sufficient to live in, but we don't know exactly how it is built or what is inside it. We use the same areas, the same chair, . . . but then we begin to discover the rooms, clean them, throw off prejudices and habits, and useless and troublesome furnishings. We open the windows, let in the light; we are no longer content with artificial light. We need true light, that of the Sun, our fire. Usually a house that has been cleaned and ordered is much more beautiful than we had considered in the semi-darkness, neglected because of distractions or other reasons. Often we discover that we like it better this way, we live better than before, we breathe more easily, and people are happy to come and visit us.



EIRNS/Helene Møller

"The study of singing does not involve an aesthetic choice, but a moral one, in the sense of truth joined with goodness and beauty," said Banaudi. Here, she conducts a master class in Boston in 2008.

The Pazzi Chapel

And now we come to the final digression: I recently went to the Pazzi Chapel, in Florence of course, the Florence of Brunelleschi and Ficino. . . .

In its naked proportion and simplicity, in the balance of light and colors, it gave a beautiful resonance to the sound of my voice: a demonstration that it is the proportion, the idea translated into construction, that resonates inside of us. The emotion I felt in hearing a response from the stone, that almost supported me in singing, as if the stone were alive, and expressing itself through cosmic vibration, made me feel part of a whole that unites stone and man, in a harmony that is the reason for the existence of everything. It is the same harmony that we seek and experience when singing together, playing together, participating in a sort of rite/celebration that is beyond religion, and is profoundly moral and human.