

## Speaking of the breath.....

Whether singer or singing teacher, everyone recognizes the importance of breathing well. The use of the breath can be researched and trained in many different ways. It is understood, explained, and applied in a variety of ways. Diversity in the repertoire and concert conditions requires a creative use of the breath. Singing in a chamber choir, opera or concert choir where you as a singer have to mix with your colleagues and still stay in touch with your own singing and use of voice, or as a soloist, requires different breathing and use of breathing technique. As mentioned before, there are many ways to research and develop the use of the breath.

Examples include

Various forms of yoga, in Feldenkrais, in the Alexander Technique or in other forms of bodywork where the breath can be found as a point of attention. Singers often seek help from these techniques to optimize their functioning as a singer. Singing teachers also make use of this expertise or refer to specialists in this field.

\* The use of the masculine form also implies the feminine and other forms.

I came into contact with the work of Ilse Middendorf through her publication of the book *Der erfahrbare Atem* ("The Perceptible Breath"). It appealed to me and aroused my curiosity. This book is a description of her fascination for the phenomenon of the breath and thereafter how she researched this through experiences. She was the founder of an institute that bears her name in Berlin. There she trained many people in her breathing theory. Through the collaboration with her students and the continuous exchanges between them, she was able to deepen her experience and knowledge and eventually described this in the aforementioned book.

Through contact with Ilse Middendorf, I came into contact with breathing pedagogue Petra Bodnik in Düsseldorf, one of her earliest students in Berlin. After being treated by her a number of times, I started participating in courses she gave in Germany. Later I asked her to come to Amsterdam to work with singers and singing teachers. All this has led to a period of more than 25 years of fruitful cooperation.

Breath work as described by Ilse Middendorf has a completely different starting point than the breath and breathing technique that is needed as part of singing technique. When developing breathing technique in relation to singing, it is necessary to have a good knowledge of the muscles that participate in breathing and the way in which these muscles function in good coordination. This makes it possible for the breath movement to find its way as freely as possible. Conversely, this free breathing movement helps to make the muscle movements elastic and smooth. This requires training, good body awareness and the ability to read and perceive this effect. Just as a dancer trains and optimizes his muscular instrument in order to have a muscle system that reacts normally while dancing, the singer has the same opportunity to have his instrument available while singing. I would like to note that singing and dance are different disciplines with different uses of the body as an instrument.

In breath work as described by Middendorf, as mentioned before, there is a different starting point. The development of the breath deals primarily with the breath itself, as it manifests itself freely in the body. There is no immediate question as to how to apply this in, for example, singing or moving. It is an investigation that requires a physical awareness, being

able to perceive the movement of the breath without directing it. It requires patience and attention to wait for the breath movement that comes and goes. It requests that the breath is not consciously sent out. It can contribute to a development path that is about the individual, the essence of the individual human being. There is an apparent discrepancy between the technical application of the breath by the singer and the development of the breath as an independent phenomenon. In my work as a singing teacher, this question has always occupied me, and I have tried to understand where these two worlds influence each other, what they have in common and what it can mean for the singer, the person who sings and the singing teacher, the person who is in communication with his student.

### **A first orientation in breath work.**

In my work, in addition to individual lessons and also classes of a few days where the singers are always present at each other's lessons. We start these days by collectively doing a number of exercises related to Ilse Middendorf's breath theory. Through the various observations and reflections during the exercises, much information is released that is inspiring for all participants, including myself.

A number of introductory exercises that I use to become familiar with this breath work are described below. I would like to point out that there is an essential difference between reading and understanding an exercise and performing an exercise under guidance and being able to reflect and exchange on it. As with the development of the singing voice and singing, these exercises also require time and patience.

Exercise: let yourself be carried.

Stretch out on a comfortable surface.

Imagine being carried by the floor. Try to observe which parts of your body are being carried (feet, hands, elbows, sacrum, shoulder blades, etc., and also the head).

Become aware of what this does to your body.

Does it relax? Does it get lighter or heavier? What is easy to carry and what is less easy?

Now bring your attention to the breath movement, and let it come and go in its own rhythm. After a while, it can be observed that after letting go of the breath, there is a moment of pause. From there, a new inhalation movement is initiated. In the moment of pause, the breath is present, but at rest. There is no emptiness. It is therefore present at all moments of the breath movement.

Exercise: around the ischium.

This is a seated exercise on a stool or chair, preferably with a wooden seat. Choose a chair/stool that is the right height for your height.

Sitting on a stool, the two ischium bones are perceptible.

These are part of the skeleton and while sitting they carry the skeleton, supporting the uplifting.

By making small rotational movements at the level of the sit bones, it can be observed that the sit bones can move flexibly. By allowing this slight movement to last for some time, the spine can become more flexible and easier to perceive and more stable.

With a small movement backwards from the ischium bones - you come to sit just behind them, as it were - an inhalation movement in the lower back is perceptible. Moving forward

again, you sit on the sit bones, you exhale. So it is the physical movement that invites the inhalation movement.

The next step is to use the voice and make small articulation movements while exhaling, sitting back down on the ischium.

Exercise: standing, rolling and upright.

In this exercise, the first focus is on the skin of the soles of both feet.

The contact with the floor is initially between the skin of the soles of the feet and the surface.

Note that the body weight does not put any strain on the skin of the soles of the feet.

By making small movements to the left and right, it can be observed that the pressure on the left or right sole of the foot increases and decreases again. However, the contact with the surface remains light. It is the mobility of the foot that makes the movement possible. The skin of the soles of the feet remains calm in contact with the floor. Become aware of what this does to the body and how it supports its uplifting.

In the second part of this exercise, the body gradually moves forwards into a hanging position.

The spine relaxes during this rolling motion and makes the movement light. Through this

physical movement, the breath is invited to flow in and it allows the spine to breathe, as it

were. From there, roll upwards, while exhaling gently. Try to perceive when the body wants to breathe in again, stop the upright movement for a moment and give the body time to breathe.

Then continue the movement exhaling, until you are fully upright.

Hereafter, the same exercise, but now with the use of the voice on the vowel /o/. The sound helps the body to come to its upright position. The connection between the upright movement, the breath and the vibrating vocal cords forms the sound and gives it its quality.

These three exercises do not yet involve vocal technique exercises.

They are exercises to observe the breath movement, to understand the relationship with the body and body movement and to investigate what influence this has on the quality and scope of sound and articulation. It provides an opportunity to perceive the flexibility and available spaces in and around the body and to gradually let them become the body's own. The body stores this as a memory and this own ability can be addressed during and through singing, as it were. It builds a bridge between the singer and the singing human being in his individuality.

As written earlier, there seems to be a discrepancy between Ilse Middendorf's breathwork and the technical use of the breath while singing. It is therefore interesting to look at the relationship between the breathing movement and the breathing muscles. The breath in its freedom and the muscles in their suppleness and elasticity.

### **Coherence between the breath movement and the breathing muscles.**

When a child is born, everyone waits for the moment when the child starts crying. It's alive.

When crying, the vocal cords make a closing movement and the diaphragm starts to move in conjunction with this. From there, the first breathing impulse is activated and the child starts breathing independently. The diaphragm continues to move in conjunction with the rhythm of the breath movement.

The first sounds that the child will make seem incoherent, but actually the first coordination between voice, articulation and breathing movement is activated. Even if there is no concrete language yet, there may be the experience of the child expressing himself. The unique and playful character of this and the communication with the world around him is essential.

In fact, something similar happens when speaking and singing.

When a singer prepares to sing, he prepares his breath.

The body and its posture are neither too tense nor too relaxed. There is proper tone. The body posture is erect, there is a slight ground contact and the breathing muscles are elastic and available to move with the breath movement.

The singer breathes in lightly through the nose, prevents the drawing of the breath and he knows that the diaphragm is making a widening movement. The breath movement is more or less total and manifests itself in a movement that continues to the lower back, the sacrum and the tailbone. At the same time, the lower abdominal muscles remain elastic, retain a degree of tone and absorb the breathing movement, as it were.

The singer now has a free and well-prepared instrument. He himself is consciously present in this with his being, his talent and his need to express himself, in communication with his accompanist and his audience.

At the start of singing, several movements are initiated in the instrument. The vocal cords close, the articulation movements in the mouth respond to shape the pronounced text, the ventilated diaphragm reacts elastically and initially widens slightly, the lower abdominal muscles and pelvic floor support and coordinate the gradual movement of the diaphragm back to the original position.

This wonderful ability of the body allows the movement of the breath to be completely free. It is not necessary to take in a lot of breath, and while singing the breath stays in the body, so to speak, and works together with the breathing muscles. This means that the body can be experienced as open and flexible during singing. The coordination between the outflowing air and the elastic breathing muscles provides a feeling of healthy resistance. The voice is, as it were, carried by this resistance and the singer can sing in constant contact with this breath quality.

It is remarkable, and at the same time so logical, that you can sing with so little air. After all, the amount of air that passes through the vocal cords when singing is minimal, very little can pass through.

### **Coherence, articulation and the vowel spaces in the body.**

Articulation plays a major role in the development of the singing voice and the speaking voice and during singing and speaking. The arrangement of the consonants and vowels is important and must be well understood. In the work of Ilse Middendorf the importance of the arrangement of the consonants and vowels can also be found.

It is interesting to see what her work can mean for the development of the singing and speaking voice and for singing and speaking itself.

Ilse Middendorf describes how each vowel has a relationship with spaces in the body and manifests itself there as a breath movement. This breath movement takes on its own form and substance. An exercise to get to know these spaces is to sing a vowel silently, i.e. without actually singing it. This again requires the ability to allow the breath to make its own movement, and not to force it.

One example is the vowel U, ( like in the German word Gut) which, when sung silently, causes a breath movement in the pelvic space and pelvic floor.

The vowel I( like in the German word Liebe) is, as it were, opposite the vowel U and evokes the movement of breath that encloses the shoulders and head.

The vowel Ü (like in the German word Über), activates a breathing movement that can be observed in the verticality of the body.

The vowel E,(like in the German word Ehe) which manifests itself in the movement of the breath, which encloses the diaphragm region.

In the breath theory of Ilse Middendorf there is a much more detailed description of how the breathing spaces can be found and how they relate to each other, and I would like to refer to that.

For me as a singing teacher, the perception of these breathing spaces and gradually embodying them, has contributed to my listening skills while teaching. It gives me the opportunity to listen not to, but listen as it were into the sound quality of the singer and from there to further develop the resonance and carrying capacity of the voice. The vowel spaces in the body enrich and support the actual vowels sung.

The consonants also have their own correspondences in the body. Examples are the consonant L that causes a springy reaction in the lower pelvic space, the consonant M that vibrates in the whole body, the consonant S that causes the abdominal wall to contract on the inside.

Again, I refer to the breath theory of Ilse Middendorf for a detailed description of how the different consonants manifest themselves in the body.

Articulation plays a major role in the technique of singing. The tongue, lips and soft palate are in a continuous flexible movement. The breath movement is present in the same moment and manifests itself as a continuous legato. Technically, you could say that the articulation movements in the oral cavity remain separate from the legato breathing movement. This breathing movement is, as it were, behind the articulation in the pharynx, and precisely because it remains separate from the articulation, they reinforce each other's effect. The articulation activates the movement of the breath, as it were. The breathing movement, the speed of the air, allows the articulation to remain light and compact.

Just as Ilse Middendorf talks about the vowel spaces in the body, the singer or singing teacher can understand how vowels manifest themselves as movement in the mouth space by observing the articulation movements of the tongue.

Singing different vowels silently, as described earlier, provides the opportunity to experience what movements the tongue is inclined to make. With vowels such as the I, the Ee, the Ü or the Ö (like in the German word Schön), it is clearly noticeable that the tongue itself makes a lifting movement. This lifting movement of the tongue is not uniform. Each of these vowels requires its own specific tongue movement. The Ee causes a width in the tongue, the Ü makes the middle part move more at the back, just like the I. In that moment, the edges of the tongue look for light contact with the upper molars.

In vowels such as the OO, the Ö or the AA, the tongue is less high in the oral cavity, but still perceptibly present. The surface of the tongue is slightly toned and therefore contributes to the formation of vowels.

The tongue is made up of several muscles that always have a degree of tone. A fully relaxed tongue also maintains a certain tone and is therefore always available to respond to the desire to speak or sing.

It is also possible to produce the consonants silently. Consonants such as the N, the S, the T or the Z will all cause a movement in the front part of the tongue and tongue tip. The J and the G will make the middle of the tongue move. Consonants such as the V (between English W and V), the M, the P and the B will cause a preparatory movement in the lips. When the movement of the tongue is observed, the consonant can be spoken from there without pressure of the breath or excess muscle tension. When pronouncing consonants or vowels sounding in a text, the articulation movement is already activated and prepared, and can be performed without extra effort. This prevents over-articulation or breath pressure on the consonants.

It is remarkable that during the preparation of the articulation, as described above, a breathing movement can be observed that coincides with Ilse Middendorf's description of the breathing movement. A well-understood and prepared articulation can therefore contribute to a bridge between the work of Ilse Middendorf and the work of the singer and singing pedagogue

## **Finally**

In this article I have described where I can possibly find a connection between the work of Ilse Middendorf as a breath pedagogue and our work as singing teachers and singers. When the desire to sing, to make music, becomes manifest in yourself, it is the beginning of a path of development. You will notice which styles of music you are attracted to and what it takes to shape this. The repertoire for the classical voice is enormous and covers a large period of time.

The development of the vocal instrument takes time and there are technical conditions to keep the voice healthy when used intensively. You could say that this technique is the channelling of the musical and vocal talent, that which is specific to the singer.

As a singer you are your own instrument, you always have your voice with you. Your body is your instrument and your body is you, in the same moment.

The connection between the singer with his musical capacities, and the person himself who is present in it, allows the singer to express himself in his own way in the music and the contact with his audience to be open.

The work of Ilse Middendorf can play a supporting role in finding this connection. One's own body, with a free breathing movement in it, becomes available, as it were, to shape the technical conditions, the singing technique.

The connection between one's own body and the free movement of the breath and communication with the other person, the singing student, also plays a major role for the singing teacher. While teaching, observing and listening to the student, the teacher's body provides information, resonates as it were in response to that which is observed. With this, the teacher connects with the current level of the singer/student. This makes teaching a collaboration and exchange between teacher and student.

The music is there, the desire to sing is there, the body is there, the breath is there, they like to seek each other out and they strengthen each other. How beautiful this can be!