

The Nafisi System of Singing Gestures and Body-Movements

Gestures are used by many singing teachers in a variety of ways and contexts – and yet, they have never been analyzed or specified nor is there a commonly used terminology to describe them. The here presented system and nomenclature is based on an observational study carried out over several weeks at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music (see also Nafisi 2008, 2010).

The term *Gesture* is used here to describe particular movements of hands and arms with head and torso as reference points.

Gesture-types

Based on their pedagogical intention Gestures used in the singing lesson have been distinguished as *Musical Gestures*, *Physiological Gestures* and *Sensation Related Gestures*.

Musical Gestures are gestures in which the hands are used to give a visible form to musical phenomena. Music being an inherently immaterial, abstract matter, these gestures have no reference point in the ‘bodily world’ but symbolize pure thought-images. Examples of *Musical Gestures* are

- conducting gestures
- a hand describing a horizontal line to depict “legato”
- showing the inflexion of a phrase with the hands
- beating a rhythm in the air

- hand-signs used in the Curwen, Kodály or related methods

Physiological Gestures are gestures that visualize actual internal physiological mechanisms related to the singing process. The pedagogic intention behind these Gestures is to make the depicted physiological actions known and understandable to the student or to facilitate the functioning of the visualized mechanism. Examples of *Physiological Gestures* are:

- moving a hand palm-down downwards in front of the upper abdomen to "show" the descent of the diaphragm during inhalation
- a hand held palm down and curved next to an ear to "show" the elevated soft palate
- pushing both opened hands palm-out in chest high as if leaning against an invisible wall to illustrate "appoggio"

Sensation Related Gestures are *Gestures* that illustrate singing metaphors, imagery and/or acoustic phenomena. They visualize subjective thoughts and/or sensations connected to a desired vocal sound but do not reflect actual physiological occurrences. Examples of Sensation Related Gestures are:

- fingers pointing forward to illustrate “forward placement” of a vocal tone
- touching one's forehead and eye sockets with the fingertips to illustrate resonance in the "mask"
- all hand gestures that visualize the "shape" of a vocal tone (e.g. "open", "round", "pointed", "focused")

The described *Musical Gestures*, *Physiological Gestures* and *Sensation Related Gestures* can be employed by teachers to enhance explanations and/or illustrate demonstrations and can also be carried out by students to help their understanding and/or facilitate the functioning of certain singing related mechanisms.

Body-Movements are in this context distinguished from *Gestures* in that they do not have an intended "expressive" component and cannot be employed by the teacher as a means to enhance explanation or demonstration. *Body-Movements* are used as learning-tools for the singing-student. Examples are:

- walking
- swinging arms
- bending knees
- any posture that deviates from the default upright standing