

## Daniel's Story

### *My Listening Centre Experience*

By Daniel Shigo

My journey to the Listening Centre has been a long one. A professional singer, I did not come upon the work of Alfred Tomatis until I was 41 years old. While captivated with singing at an early age, my childhood was beset with a stammer that started around 4th grade. I was having a difficult time in school and at home, and felt like I was a step behind everyone. I even started school a year late. During my Junior High years I started singing in groups. It helped me deal with my problems and made me feel like I belonged. And lo and behold, I didn't stammer or stutter when I sang! Who could know then that I would become a professional singer living in the Big Apple, singing in the New York City Opera and Metropolitan Opera choruses as well as in concert as a soloist?

It was during my undergraduate years that I had my hearing tested as part of the process in working at a Steel Mill. I had some hearing loss. "No big deal," I was told. "It's not enough to need hearing aids." This was the late 70's. Tomatis's ideas and method were not known in North America as they are now and no one knew that it would affect my singing and speaking.

At the age of 17 I started taking lessons. (I had wanted to sing ever since I met my 'daemon' while hearing Julie Andrews in *Mary Poppins*.) I had a booming undisciplined instrument that was dark and covered. The diction was muffled. I swallowed the tone. When I spoke, I sounded like a tinny Baritone and had a hard time negotiating the upper register. It was not until graduate school that I came into contact with a teacher who helped me work out some of my vocal difficulties. One result was that after auditioning I was offered a position with the New York City Opera Regular Chorus. Voila! I was a getting paid to have fun. However, no amount of study solved some persistent problems. All my hard work still didn't make it any more comfortable to sing.

Here I was, a decade into my tenure at City Opera and singing wasn't getting any easier. In fact, one night I stood downstage during a frothy Operetta and could barely get through the number. I remember telling myself, "I've got to figure out what I'm doing!" (My early listening problem was catching up with me!) By this time I had become well versed in vocal pedagogy techniques and had studied with excellent teachers. But at this juncture nothing I thought or did made any difference. There was an internal struggle going on inside me.

I resumed my study and research in earnest, poring over books at the New York Public Library looking for an answer to my difficulty. It was around this time that I stumbled upon Alfred Tomatis's work "The Conscious Ear." Tomatis was writing about me! I could see myself in the descriptions he wrote about his patients. I had my listening checked again and dug out my first test from 1979. It was now 1999. The curve on the graph looked much the same. I hadn't lost any hearing, thank God. But what did it mean? Would the Listening Training help me? I was excited and curious to find out what affect, if any, it would have on me. Would it help me work out me difficulties? Would I be able to find that elusive sense of ease I admired so much in others?

During November 1999 I went to the Listening Centre , spending 2 weeks listening to Mozart and walking around the City. I found out that I was Mixed-Dominant. Meaning; my right ear was not leading as it should. Tomatis found out that when the right ear does not have dominance over the left learning

difficulties and problems with communication follow. Hence, one of the aims of the Listening Training is to get the right ear to lead the voice.

I had many interesting and curious experiences. Some bordered on the mystical. I dreamt like mad. My posture became straighter. I felt as if someone stretched my head away from my chest. During the first week, I sat in a cafe, Vivaldi's Gloria was on the loud speakers. All of a sudden, I felt as if I was IN the music. I heard all the parts, inner and out voices, harmony, melody and counterpoint entwining and swimming around me in aural 3D. I started to cry. The music was more beautiful than I had ever experienced. Ecstatic, I was alive, ringing with sound. The tone beamed around me everywhere at once. (It reminded me of the time when I heard Joan Sutherland sing in concert. It came from around the back of your head and made you tingle.)

My childhood stammer surfaced in full force during the second thirty-hour training. Previously, when nervous or ill at ease, it would occasionally appear, but now it came back in every sentence I uttered. This, along with a persistent popping in my left ear, was present during the day I went with friends to a party along Lake Ontario. Almost everyone there was in education with quite a few English teachers thrown in to boot, and here I was stammering up a storm. Only this time, it was kind of funny, like it was happening to some one else. I could feel it coming on like a wave and all I needed to do was to ride it out. I didn't get stuck in it. It was like some long tied-up knot was finally unraveling. Using exercises I was encouraged to try out at home, the stammering eventually disappeared. These simple exercises have been essential in maintaining my vocal health. The 'yellow line' in the middle of the road, they keep me oriented in the right direction.

The Listening Training reorganized my physical movements. During the active part of the training I saw my facial expression change.. My face "opened up". The area around the cheeks and nose widened and lifted. (In some pedagogical circles a sign of the Italian School.) I heard my voice "whistle" when uttering sibilants. My lips projected forward slightly. My tongue seemed to stretch out of my throat and moved forward in my mouth. I had always been technically oriented, but this was new to me. Never had I been able to make such dramatic and far-reaching changes in such a short time. (I like to think that all those years of lessons helped as well. All that stored up information was finally being put to some use. Paul Madaule related in a workshop how the Listening Training helps in "connecting the dots.")

I began to perceive what it was that I was missing. The phonemes "N" and "M" started jumping out at me when I read them. They were like old friends I had forgotten about. When I got home I immediately I noticed a greater ease in production, my range broadened while the scale became more equalized. The vowels became "open" and the consonants more distinct. I found that I had to re-learn my whole repertoire, guarding against old habits while sifting through all my vocal techniques, discarding some while refining others. The process continues daily with the use my best friend; the tape recorder.

What do I perceive now when I sing? The tone seems to be both in my body and my head. It resounds in the back of my head as well as in the "Mask". Everywhere really. A paradox, it is inside and outside my body. While difficult to describe, it feels wonderful. The prevailing sensation of my voice is that it is higher and lighter while outwardly remaining a rich lyric Bass-Baritone. I hear a buzzy sound in my head, not unlike like the high sounds one hears during the training. Singing has become a joy and is physically a thrill. It feels good. Singing operatically takes a great deal of energy. But now that energy has focus. I no longer feel like I am wandering around in a dark room looking for the light switch.

My singing voice is now closely allied with my speaking voice, necessarily a more resonant/deep sound as if I was speaking to a group of people. It takes no more effort than that. No pushing, pulling or shoving. Herman Klein, a student of Manuel Garcia (considered the first voice scientist), called this “The Singing Position.” While difficult to put into words, this “Singing Position” is greater than the sum of its physical parts. To focus on the muscular movements alone without the aural awareness that brings them into being is getting the cart before the horse. This is the most important idea I have gleaned from my experience with the Listening Training; THE EAR LEADS THE BODY. (The Italian singing manuals of the 17th and 18th Century record that the teacher first demonstrated for the student and the student then repeated what he heard. Listening awareness was of paramount importance.)

The Listening Training has not only put my career back on track, it has opened up a whole new world as well. I am learning music with greater ease. Foreign languages no longer hold the terrors for me that they once did. More importantly, I no longer feel like I’m one step behind everyone. The Listening Training has been the “key” which has enabled me to grow both professionally and personally. It’s like I’ve been let out of a cage. I’m happy now to sing of my freedom.

It has been an amazing journey. Many thanks to Paul Madaule and the Listening Centre staff for the special work that you do.

*Daniel is the editor of VOICE Prints, a Bulletin of the New York Singing Teachers Association and gives talks and workshops in his community in which he often refers to our work.*