

The German School of Singing: A Compendium of German Treatises 1848–1965

Joshua J. Whitener



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Joshua J. Whitener

prov·e·nance (prŏv'ə-nəns) *n.* Place of origin, source. [LAT. *Provenire*, to originate.]

[I possess a rudimentary ability to translate German and Italian. While mostly accurate, my efforts are onerous and time consuming. However, literary doors are closed to me because of my inability to read these languages fluently.

This does not occur in a vacuum. Vast amounts of writings exist that languish in library archives because of the inability for them to be properly translated. A translator must possess the ability to translate, apply historical context, and have working knowledge of the presented field.

Fortunately, those gifted scribes do exist. In this edition of “Provenance,” I present an overview of the work of Dr. Joshua J. Whitener, an American tenor currently performing with the Nationaltheater Mannheim. Having stumbled upon his dissertation while researching another topic, I immediately contacted Dr. Whitener to ask permission to represent his work in this column. He graciously agreed. The information included will not necessarily be found in standard voice pedagogy textbooks. I have presented the summaries of each chapter of the dissertation, but I encourage you to do an Internet search for the full document. It is extremely thorough and opens another literary door for those of us that are limited in our own abilities to attain similar information (Kimberly Broadwater).]

THE GERMAN SCHOOL OF SINGING is often characterized by the principles of a muscular approach to respiration, an overexpansion of the chest, a darker tonal preference, fabricated laryngeal position, and the emphasis on text over vocalism. Singers, teachers of singing, musicologists, composers, and conductors rely on astute observations and intensive study of historical artifacts, including original writings, translated work, and secondary analyses to understand the German approach. English-speaking audiences typically “know” German technique through English language writings or translated versions of scholars such as Richard Miller and German pedagogues such as Marchesi, Stockhausen, and Lehmann. However, omission of some seminal writings by German pedagogues not yet translated to English limit a full understanding of both the evolution of German technique and its applicability to teaching singing today.

Journal of Singing, May/June 2019
Volume 75, No. 5, pp. 589–596
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This analysis documents the approach to singing advocated by nine German pedagogues beginning in the mid-1800s through the middle of the twentieth century. Using original German writings from these authors as sources for this review, it becomes clear that as the German style developed, there was a desire to move away from other European techniques, particularly Italian principles, to create a unique German method. Yet ultimately, many Italian ideas remained in the German approach. By comparing the beliefs and singing techniques of important German authors, a chronological appraisal of German style identifies the essentials of a German school of singing. These include Italian fundamentals of diaphragmatic-costal breathing, elastic tension of the breath musculature, *imposto* (breath-resonance connection), *chiaroscuro* tonal quality, an importance of head voice in blending registers, use of consonants in balancing a tone, and a *gestalt* approach to singing. These principles were modified to fit German preferences and taste.

This review details seminal writings of German authors who designed, developed, and refined a German approach to singing. Authors selected were those who made substantial contributions to the evolution of this singing style. As an overall German approach to singing developed, there was disagreement among teachers as to which elements were foundational to “correct technique” and how these should be practiced and delivered by the singer. For example, George Armin felt the answer to singing was in his *Stauprinzip*, a muscular storing and damming of the breath against the vocal folds. However, contemporaries such as Paul Bruns strongly criticized this idea, saying instead the use of *Minimalluft* (minimal air) and relaxation of the breathing muscles (e.g., abdominals) were the solution to problems associated with singing.

This present review details key points for each of the German authors and summarizes English language writings central to the topic at hand. Elements foundational to singing are detailed by author to include discussions about respiration, resonance, phonation, registration, and unique aspects of each treatise. The purpose therefore of this review is to compare and contrast various elements of technique advocated by all authors in an effort to define a German approach to singing—the German school of singing.

HEINRICH FERDINAND MANNSTEIN (STEINMANN) (1806–1872)

Die grosse italienische Gesangschule (1848)

1) Place in History

- His treatise demonstrated the influence of Italian singing in Germany in the nineteenth century.

2) Respiration

- Optimal breathing for singing consists of: 1) upon inhalation, the singer expands the rib cage and pulls in the lower abdomen; and 2) throughout phonation, the singer strives to maintain expansion of the chest, thereby delaying movement back to the body’s resting position. Mannstein’s description suggests a method of pancostal breathing.
- Inhalation should be silent, preferred for vocal production and artistry.
- Breath exercises without phonation are not useful.

3) Resonation

- There are three types of vocal tones: 1) nasal tone (*Nasenton*), 2) laryngeal tone (*Kehlton*), and 3) balanced tone. The balanced tone, which corresponds to a placement point at the hard palate, is the ideal tone. Mannstein’s writing suggests he was an advocate of a *chiaroscuro* tonal quality.
- Mouth position is critical to finding the proper artistic tone. Mannstein’s description suggests the creation of an “open throat” formed by lifting the soft palate through the reflex action of the zygomatic muscles, opening the pharynx by maintaining a forward tongue position, and freeing the jaw through inner-diction.

4) Phonation

- The onset should avoid any unwanted sound during the attack (e.g., [h] as in a breathy onset, or a glottal plosive).
- Student should avoid any “scooping” in pitch when making an onset.
- The onset is made freely and quickly.
- The onset is prepared by a slight opening of the mouth; if the mouth is too open, the tone will have a “careless, and crying” character.
- Tone should not be pushed out of the mouth, but rather drawn in—*filare il tuono* (spinning of tone). This idea addresses the issue of the balance of subglottic air pressure between the vocal folds, breath, and respiratory musculature.

5) Registration

- All voices other than the soprano have two registers—head voice and chest voice. To unify these registers, Mannstein likely advocated for some aspect of passive vowel modification.
- Falsetto should not be avoided; it is important to the function and development of the voice.

6) Other Important Aspects

- Agility:
 - is fundamental to the development of the voice.
 - is a way to achieve good intonation, a balanced tone, and strength and power.
- *Messa di voce*:
 - is a method to gain strength, flexibility, fullness of tone, and a powerful expansive breath.
 - is the sole method to connect breath with the upper register.

FRIEDRICH SCHMITT (1812–1884)***Große Gesangsschule für Deutschland (1854)***

1) Place in History

- Schmitt's treatise represented the first attempt to create a school of singing based on German principles.

2) Respiration

- Breathing for singing is different than speaking and consists of a greatly expanded rib cage.
- Expansion of the chest is formed during inhalation and maintained throughout phonation.
- Schmitt's discussion is reflective of diaphragmatic-costal breathing; however, the emphasis he places on chest expansion suggests overbreathing, an action foreign to *appoggio*.
- His view the breath should be "taken as quickly as possible" is contrary to the Italian tradition and that of many modern voice teachers' approach of a long slow inhalation (*respiro*).

3) Resonation

- Nasality assists the singer's tone; it is this characteristic that gives color to the voice and carrying power.
- The forward vowels [i] and [e] as well as nasal consonants are beneficial in finding nasal resonance.
- Whether or not Schmitt actually advocated a nasal tone is uncertain. His discussion implies he was supporting sympathetic nasal resonance.

4) Phonation

- The onset is vital to the beauty of tone.

- When all elements (posture, mouth and tongue position) are correct, the onset will be correct.
- The onset should be "fresh and short," like the "stroke of a hammer without any difficulty or force," and should be developed from natural speech. The inference from Schmitt's discussion was he supported a precise onset similar to Garcia's *coup de glotte*.
- A "dark onset" in which the larynx is consciously depressed is harmful to the health of the singer and disturbs the musical presentation.

5) Registration

- Schmitt states that all voice types have one register, with exception of falsetto in the tenor voice. However, he also alludes to the idea there were register breaks the singer must blend or unify.
- Falsetto is unique and very useful to the tenor; it should be developed and blended with chest voice.
- Correct acquisition of the upper register depends upon the following aspects:
 - larynx should rise;
 - glottis narrows;
 - tongue must stay forward and lie flat at the bottom front teeth;
 - good onset is necessary.
- The highest notes should move through the parts of the head and pharynx; this is the major difference between resonance of the upper and lower range.

6) Other Important Aspects

- Diction is the most important aspect of singing; it makes the voice more musically expressive than the instrument.
- Correct acquisition of diction is achieved by singing pure vowels and strong and quick consonants.

FERDINAND SIEBER (1822–1895)***Katechismus der Gesangkunst (1862)***

1) Place in History

- His treatise demonstrated the influence of Italian singing in Germany in the nineteenth century.

2) Respiration

- Promoted diaphragmatic-costal breathing.
- Inspiration consists of three simultaneous elements: 1) silent inhalation, 2) expansion of the chest, and 3) descent of the diaphragm.

- Expiration in the singing process is a balancing act of gradually releasing expansion of the chest during phonation.

3) Resonation

- The tongue is the most important muscle for achieving proper resonance; tongue faults are the causes of poor resonation.
- There are three types of faulty tones: 1) the throat sound, 2) the nasal tone, and 3) the palate sound.
- Sieber used a tongue depressor to adjust faulty tongue position.

4) Phonation

- A five-part process is necessary to achieve a “pure and clear” (balanced) tone. This type of tone, when correct, sets a foundation upon which a *messa di voce* can be performed.
- Through proper body alignment, all parts of the body work synergistically to produce an ideal tone.

5) Registration

- The voice consists of two registers—head and chest voice.
- The point at which an audible inequality (trill-like sound) is heard marks the point where a singer transitions to a new register (head in ascending, chest in descending).
- The three-register approach to registration is flawed. In this method, too much chest voice is incorporated into the middle register. This creates an uneven scale and is dangerous to the vocal health of the singer.
- He viewed registration issues in terms of laryngeal adjustment; however, one can infer there was an element of passive vowel modification present in his teaching.

6) Other Important Aspects

- Artistry and talent are different; artistry is the acquisition of technique whereas talent is naturally given.

JULIUS HEY (1832–1909)

Deutscher Gesangs-Unterricht (1884)

1) Place in History

- Julius Hey was a voice teacher who created a comprehensive approach to German singing based on Friedrich Schmitt’s model.

- He was closely connected to Wagner and aimed to create a technique to address Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

2) Respiration

- Discussion of breathing is too vague; it is difficult to know how he taught respiration.
- Overly tense muscles do not allow the breath organ to function efficiently.

3) Resonation

- There are two qualities of resonance—chest resonance and head/nasal resonance.
- A balancing of these resonance types is needed; the ratio of head/chest depends on the range in which the singer is singing. This balance is called the *gold’ne Brücke* (the golden bridge).
- Nasal resonance plays an important part in the blending of registers; it can be developed with nasal consonants.
- All vowel colors should have the same basic ground sonority.

4) Phonation

- There are three types of phonation: *Naturton* (natural tone—the easiest tone a student can make), *Normalton* (normal tone—a refined but not yet cultivated tone), and *Idealton* (ideal tone—a fully developed tone).
- The *Naturton* is the foundation for developing the *Idealton*.
- A low laryngeal position is needed for good phonation.
- The tongue has an important effect on the quality of the sung tone.

5) Registration

- There are three registers: chest register, middle register, and head register.
- Registers must be blended so that no audible changes in tone quality are heard.
- Register balance is best achieved through the use of vowels and consonants.
- Vowel modification plays a central role in balancing registers. He says nothing of the laryngeal adjustment needed.

6) Other Important Aspects

- Hey significantly influenced the practices of diction used by singers and public speakers.

- Clear vowels and strong consonants are an essential aspect of good singing.
- Pure vocalism should not be destroyed; instead it should be tempered.

BRUNO (BENNO) MÜLLER-BRUNOW (1853–1890)

Tonbildung oder Gesangsunterricht? (1890)

1) Place in History

- His method fit into a new physiological-mechanical approach to vocal training, called *Tonbildung* (cultivation of tone), representing a break from other singing schools that focused heavily on technical exercises such as agility and register blending.
- *Tonbildung* provided the foundation for future methods, most notably Armin's *Stauprinzip*.

2) Respiration

- Description of breathing is too vague to know exactly what method of breathing he advocated.
- Proper respiration is foundational to optimal function.
- Image of a proper breath simulates a fountain with a glass ball on top of its peak that corresponds to breath (water) meeting the sympathetic resonance points (ball). This is a beneficial visual, as it captures the balance of subglottic pressure between the breath musculature and the vocal folds.
- Breath exercises should be combined with humming or nasal consonants to correct hyperfunctional breath; nasal consonants create proper resonance to concentrate the tone.

3) Resonation

- A "bow-like" direction of the breath to a placement point in the front of the mouth is vital to creating an optimal tone.
- Optimal resonation is created through the primary tone (mixed vowel [ø]) and use of consonants that concentrate the sound in the front portion of the mouth.

4) Phonation

- Consonants are needed to create a healthy onset.
- Darker vowels such as [ø], [y], [o], [a], and [u] help create the proper laryngeal position for phonation.

5) Registration

- Proper registration is achieved through balancing the voice with the *Primärton* (primary tone [the student's best note]) and approaching the lower and upper registers from that point.
- As pitch rises, breath pressure at the sympathetic resonance point in the front of the mouth increases and there is a slight change in mouth position.
- Müller-Brunow's discussion of registration is vague. More research is needed to determine methods Müller-Brunow truly taught regarding this aspect.

6) Other Important Aspects

- At least five to six years of training and practice are required to fully develop a voice.

GEORGE ARMIN (HERMANN) (1871–1963)

Das Stauprinzip (1909)

1) Place in History

- Armin was a central figure in the contentious debate with Paul Bruns (*Minimalluft*) over pedagogic principles.
- He combined principles of Müller-Brunow's and Friedrich Schmitt's methods in creating his own technique.
- He was a controversial teacher in Germany because of his extreme muscular approach to singing.

2) Respiration

- Proper respiration is built upon principles of the *Stauprinzip*.
- Two important aspects of respiration are the dammed function and sounding function.
- Posture should be military-like with a tense lower body, which releases tension in the larynx.
- Support will first be felt in the upper rib cage but will move lower as the student progresses.

3) Resonation

- Vowels are dualistic in nature (flat, high spectrum vowels vs. cavernous, low spectrum vowels).
- Mixed vowels (e.g., [œ], [y]) work to break down this duality and achieve a balanced tone.

4) Phonation

- The hard glottal onset is harmful and is not useful for artistic singing.
- An onset combined with a consonant is valuable, but must be combined with the *Stauprinzip* to achieve a proper tone.

- Armin emphasizes the importance of a connection between the breath (what Armin calls the lower voice) and the upper vocal tract (what Armin calls the upper voice).

5) Registration

- Registers are dualistic in nature (head vs. chest voice).
- Registers should not be fused (*Verschmelzung*), but rather balanced (*Ausgeglichen*).
- Register breaks are divided into tetrachords; vowel modification originating from mixed vowels is the way to balance these breaks.
- Armin recommends the use of mixed vowels in adjusting registers. For example, he recommends using [œ] to develop the area of the tenor *primo passaggio*, and [y] for the development of the upper range above the *secondo passaggio*. And for the soprano, he recommends the closed vowel [y] in lower range, which gradually opens through [œ] and later to [a] as the singer ascends the scale. Once mastered, the singer could begin to incorporate more pure vowels into his/her scale.

6) Other Important Aspects

- Italianate bel canto principles placing vocalism over clarity of diction are not fit for German vocal music.
- Voice building leads to declamation, which is the ultimate goal of vocal study.

PAUL BRUNS (1867–1934)

Minimalluft und Stütze (1929)

1) Place in History

- Bruns served as a prominent figure in the debate between *Minimalluft* and the *Stauprinzip*.

2) Respiration

- He differentiates between the German muscular approach to respiration, *Stütze* and Italianate *appoggio*.
- *Appoggio* is the basis for a beautiful tone and optimal function.
- The diaphragm should be used in a subtler way than the typical German approach.
- A good breath is based on the following principles:
 - deep breathing is not a conscious activity;
 - the singer should take a breath that is long and slow;

- the breath should not be sudden or with a sense of angst;
- breath should be taken as if one were “smelling a flower”;
- in a good breath, it is not possible to feel the diaphragm;
- “breath gymnastics,” i.e., overtensing the musculature of the abdominal region, should be avoided;
- the singer should focus on expiration more than inspiration, thereby allowing for inhalation without excessive muscular tension.

3) Resonation

- Partial tones are a result of the *Minimalluft* method, allowing for a diaphragmatic acoustic connection.
- Vowels and consonants help the singer access proper resonance.
- Falsetto helps the singer access and strengthen resonance.

4) Phonation

- Proper phonation is based on the principle of *Freilauf* (freewheeling, uninhibited coordination) in which the diaphragm is allowed to directly affect phonation.
- Proper phonation is caused by a primal response from the diaphragm.

5) Registration

- Falsetto plays an important role in the strengthening of registers.
- Future teachers will approach register adjustment by listening for partial tones and the ratio of chest and head voice present in the tone.

6) Other Important Aspects

- Bruns saw the following problems with the contemporary operatic profession:
 - the singer’s fight against the orchestra;
 - lack of knowledge from those making operatic decisions;
 - poor stagings.

FRANZISKA MARTIENSSEN-LOHMANN (1887–1971)

Der wissende Sänger (1956)

1) Place in History

- Martienßen-Lohmann’s writings marked a new shift from the physiological-mechanical approach

(*Tonbildung*) to singing to a more individual approach.

- She had a significant impact on the tradition of singing in Germany as both an author and as a voice teacher.

2) Respiration

- There are six elements for a proper respiration:
 - a connection between breath and the sympathetic resonance (*imposto*), what she called “skull sound”;
 - the presence of legato in the singer’s phrasing;
 - noble body posture;
 - breath power and full vocal fold closure;
 - balanced tone and resonance;
 - elastic singing.
- Posture is very important to the breath process. It is a low-breath in itself, as it sets the correct conditions for the respiratory muscles to function optimally.
- *Appoggio* differs from *Stütze*. *Appoggio* focuses on the entire singing process (resonation, respiration, registration) while *Stütze* has a narrow focus, only centering on respiration.
- A good functioning diaphragm is instrumental for achieving *appoggio* and good breath control.

3) Resonation

- A resonant voice has characteristics of forward placed vowels and an undisturbed ground sonority (timbre remains the same regardless of vowel color).
- Carrying power is caused by vocal fold vibration in combination with head voice resonance.
- A firm understanding of formants, vowels, and how they relate to registration is necessary to develop a balanced voice.

4) Phonation

- Three types of onsets have a natural correlation to the three different registers, noting however the balanced attack should be made throughout the entire range:
 - hard (glottal)/chest voice;
 - breathy/head voice;
 - balanced/middle voice.
- Glottal attack is harmful and should be avoided. She believes Garcia II was misunderstood on this principle.
- The larynx should lie comfortably low and should be formed by the breath. Martienßen-Lohmann

believes Stockhausen was misunderstood on this principle.

5) Registration

- There are three distinct registers corresponding to different actions of the vocal folds:
 - chest register, a strong action of the vocalis;
 - middle voice, mixed action of the vocalis and head voice musculature;
 - head voice, a vocal fold action where only the fringe area of the vocal folds vibrate.
- Blending the three registers into one register is ideal and is built on use of the head voice.
- Falsetto is not useful in both performing and teaching classical singing.
- *Deckung*, a mechanical register adjustment foreign to the Italian school, results in a loss of resonance and a tightness of tone; it should be avoided.

6) Other Important Aspects

- Consonants can be beneficial in learning how to sing.
- Articulation and diction are different. Articulation is the training of the mouth, jaw, and tongue while diction is more of a singing-like declamation.

FREDERICK HUSLER (1884–1969)

Singen: die physische Natur des Stimmorganes (1965)

1) Place in History

- Husler was a well respected pedagogue whose ideas were disseminated across Germany and the rest of the world through his writing and teaching of students.

2) Respiration

- There is a counterbalance produced between rib expansion and diaphragmatic engagement.
- A good breath should be felt in the lower back where the strongest muscles of the diaphragm are connected.
- The breath process should be simplified and should involve minimal muscular contraction.
- There are six faulty breathing methods:
 - fixing the flanks;
 - permanent contraction of the diaphragm;
 - diaphragmatic pressure;
 - forced deep breathing;
 - congesting method (*Stauprinzip*);
 - pressing.

- There are nine principles of breathing:
 - avoid any systems of breathing;
 - do not overfill the lungs;
 - overfilling the lungs will result in a weakening of the respiratory system;
 - breath should be small, thorough, and intensive;
 - vocal folds are capable of vibrating by themselves; the breath organ is not the motor;
 - breath should not be taken in deliberately and the singer should aim at breathing out;
 - breath exercises without phonation are not beneficial;
 - a properly functioning larynx is regulated by the breath;
 - systems that try to improve breathing are always incorrect.

3) Resonation

- Placing a tone at different placement points is the best method to correct faults in singing. The chart/diagram he includes in his book describing these placement points is one of the most characteristic aspects of his teaching.

4) Phonation

- Husler's views on phonation correspond to the Neurochronaxic Theory of voice production.
- Forward vowels assist in achieving a healthy adduction.
- The glottal attack is harmful, particularly for the lay person or beginning singer.

5) Registration

- Singers and teachers should approach registration from a one-register view.
- Falsetto is instrumental in building a healthy, balanced voice.

6) Other Important Aspects

- Good voice production is not dependent upon individual muscles, but is rather a sum of its parts.

American tenor, **Joshua J. Whitener** has sung in opera houses throughout Europe and the United States. After his first experiences as member of the Opera Studios of the Glimmerglass Opera, Central City Opera, and Des Moines Metro Opera, Whitener moved to Germany, where engagements have taken him to opera houses such as Teatro alla Scala, the Salzburg Festival, Aalto Theater Essen, National Theater Mannheim, Theater Dortmund, Staatstheater Kassel, Staatstheater Darmstadt, Theater Bonn, Landestheater Linz, Landestheater Innsbruck, Musiktheater in Revier Gelsenkirchen, Staatstheater Meiningen, Theater Plauen–Zwickau and

Mainfranken Theater Würzburg. He has been a member of the ensemble at National Theater Mannheim since 2017.

Whitener has an extensive operatic repertoire, which encompasses the main tenor roles of the Mozart repertoire —Don Ottavio (*Don Giovanni*), Ferrando (*Così fan tutte*), Tamino (*Die Zauberflöte*), and Belmonte (*Entführung aus dem Serail*)—to bel canto works such as Elvino in Bellini's *La sonnambula*, Nemorino in Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore* and Don Ramiro in Rossini's *La Cenerentola*; to roles of the Germanic Romantic repertoire such as Lionel in Flotow's *Martha*, Baron Kronthal in Lortzing's *Der Wildschütz*, Walther von der Volgoweide in Wagner's *Tannhäuser*, and Narraboth in Strauss's *Salome*. Additionally, Whitener has sung many modern works with great success, such as Tom Rakewell in Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*, Lysander in Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and Andreas in Berg's *Wozzeck*.

In addition to his operatic repertoire, Whitener is also highly regarded as a concert singer with a broad repertoire from works of the Baroque era, such as the Evangelist in Bach's *St. John's Passion*, to works of the Romantic era, such as Beethoven's 9th Symphony and Verdi's *Requiem*, to works of the modern era, such as Britten's *Serenade for Tenor, Horn, and Strings*.

Dr. Whitener holds Master of Music and Doctor of Music degrees in Voice from the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music, where he was as student of Costanza Cuccaro. At IU Whitener served as an Associate Instructor of Voice. Whitener, in addition to his performing career, held teaching appointments at the Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg. He continues to maintain a private studio.

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.
I learn by going where I have to go.
We think by feeling. What is there to know?
I hear my being dance from ear to ear.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Of those so close beside me, which are you?
God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there,
And learn by going where I have to go.
Light takes the Tree; but who can tell us how?
The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair;
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Great Nature has another thing to do
To you and me; so take the lively air,
And, lovely, learn by going where to go.
This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.
What falls away is always. And is near.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I learn by going where I have to go.

Theodore Roethke, "The Waking"