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Phōnaskia for singers and orators The care and training of the voice in the Roman empire

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§ Professional singers, actors and orators in the Roman imperial period undertook specialised types of training (φωνασκία), to preserve and improve their voices, and doctors recommended similar vocal exercises to promote physical health and fitness. This paper examines some of the evidence about the techniques that were used, most of which does not come from writings on music, but from rhetoricians and medical writers. In drawing conclusions about the regime prescribed for singers, we have to rely mainly on the ways in which medical and rhetorical experts describe their techniques, and the distinctions they draw between the exercises they recommend for orators, or for people wishing to improve their general health, and those to which singers were subjected, which they typically reject as excessive. Many of the details are elusive, but although the exercises famously undertaken by the emperor Nero were probably more extreme than those in common use, it is clear that the disciplines regularly imposed on singers throughout their careers were technically specialised and physically demanding. Training of the laborious sort that singers undergo, so the medical writers assert, can seriously damage people's health, and reduce or even destroy their sexual potency. But though a singer's life evidently demanded tough physical exertions, we are also told, paradoxically, that they treated themselves as fragile and delicate, adopting special diets, taking walks at regular times of day, caring for the throat with medications and massaging it with oil, always doing gentle 'warming-up' exercises before performing, and in general caring tenderly for themselves and their voices, all of which earned them the rhetoricians' contempt.

§ Nel periodo romano, i cantanti professionisti, gli attori e gli oratori si sottoponevano a sofisticati allenamenti (φωνασκία) al fine di preservare e migliorare le proprie qualità vocali. Esercizi vocali simili a questi erano raccomandati anche dai medici per migliorare salute e forma fisica. Questo lavoro esamina alcune tra le testimonianze sulle tecniche da essi utilizzate, la maggior parte delle quali non proviene da scritti di argomento musicale, ma da autori di retorica e di medicina. Nel trarre conclusioni sul regime prescritto ai cantanti dobbiamo basarci principalmente sulle modalità con cui gli esperti di medicina e di retorica descrivevano le proprie tecniche, e sulle distinzioni da essi tracciate tra gli esercizi raccomandati agli oratori e quelli utilizzati dai cantanti, solitamente rifiutati in quanto eccessivi. Molti dettagli sono incerti ma, sebbene i famosi esercizi a cui si sottoponeva l'imperatore Nerone fossero probabilmente più estremi di quelli comunemente in uso, risulta chiaro che le discipline imposte con regolarità ai cantanti nel corso delle loro carriere fossero tecnicamente specializzate e alquanto impegnative da un punto di vista fisico. L'allenamento laborioso al quale i cantanti si sottoponevano poteva seriamente danneggiarne la salute e ridurre o addirittura distruggere la loro potenza sessuale. Tuttavia, se pur la vita di un cantante richiedeva con tutta evidenza duri sforzi fisici, paradossalmente ci viene anche riferito che i cantanti trattavano se stessi come persone fragili e delicate: essi adottavano diete speciali, facevano passeggiate ad ore prestabilite della giornata, avevano cura della propria gola con medicamenti e massaggi con olio, eseguivano costantemente esercizi di 'riscaldamento' prima di esibirsi e, più in generale, avevano cura di sé e delle proprie voci, tutte pratiche che fecero guadagnare loro il disprezzo dei retori.

Allusions to special disciplines involved in training the voice go back at least to the fourth century BC. Plato, for instance, refers to the choruses who compete in the festivals as πεφωνασκηκότες ισχνοί τε καὶ ἄσιτοι, «having undergone vocal training while thin and unfed» (*Leges* 665e). One of the Aristotelian *Problems* explains why those who do vocal training, οἱ φωνασκοῦντες, actors and singers and others of that sort, do so in the early morning while fasting; it is because food heats the breath, and hot breath roughens the windpipe and damages the voice (*Problemata* 11, 22). But as Annie Bélis quite rightly points out, there is no evidence for the existence of the voice-trainer as a distinct type of professional until late Hellenistic and Roman times, when we first meet the noun φωνασκός, *phonascus* in Latin, as the title for a professional of this sort.¹ A certain Theodorus wrote a treatise on the subject, admirably described by Diogenes Laertius (2, 103-4) as τὸ φωνασκικὸν βιβλίον πάγκαλον. Unless this Theodorus is the rhetorician who taught the young Tiberius (Suetonius *Tiberius* 57), we know nothing about him; but the fact that his work is described in these terms, as «the excellent little book on φωνασκία» (rather than «an excellent little book...»), suggests that Diogenes expected his readers to have heard of it, and hence that it enjoyed some fame in the period when he was writing (probably the early third century AD). The discipline acquired its own specialised jargon, ἀναφώνησις for a “warming-up” exercise, for example, δεινδράζουσα φωνή for a certain vocal timbre, ληκυθίζειν for creating a hollow sound, διάτραμις, which seems to mean “smooth-buttocked”, for another sort of sound, τράγος for a hoarse voice and so on.²

References to φωνασκία become very common in texts of the imperial period, especially in writings on rhetoric and on medicine. Their evidence shows clearly that vocal training in one form or another was now being used for at least three different purposes, as a discipline for orators, as a discipline for singers, and more broadly and perhaps more surprisingly, as a form of exercise conducive to general health. Although the prescriptions about φωνασκία for orators and for general health seem to have had much in common, experts in both these fields almost always insisted, as we shall see, that their techniques should be sharply distinguished from the much more specialised kind of training which singers had to undergo, for which both the rhetorical and the medical writers express a deep-rooted contempt. In this paper I shall focus as far as possible on voice-training for musicians, but our information about the other two contexts must not be neglected; much of the surviving material about singers comes from the rhetoricians and medical writers, in passages where they are trying to explain how the practices which they recommend differ from those of the musical specialists.

Before we consider a selection of the relevant texts, there are two more preliminaries that must be put in place. First, the discipline of φωνασκία for singers

¹ BELIS (1999), p. 186.

² See Phrynichus grammaticus *Praeparatio sophistica* 106; *ibid.* 86; Aelius Dionysius *Attika onomata* s.v. δεινδράζουσα φωνή; Hesychius s.v. διάτραμις, δ 1392, quoting from Strattis; Palladius *Commentaria in Hippocratis librum sextum de morbis popularibus* p. 92 Dietz.

was entirely separate from their specifically musical training, and the trainer needed no qualifications as a musician himself. He was concerned only with the strengthening and maintenance of the vocal apparatus; he was more closely analogous to a football team's physiotherapist than to the coach who trains players in the tactics and skills of the game itself. (This too is a point properly emphasised by Annie Bélis).³ Secondly, even a cursory reading of the texts will make it clear that although the word φωνασκός or *phonascus* does indeed refer to a voice-trainer in some passages, it by no means always does so; and that is almost never what is meant when people are described as φωνασκικοί or οἱ φωνασκοῦντες. These are almost always the singers, orators or keep-fit enthusiasts themselves, the people who undergo vocal training and not those who provide it; and so too, in a good many texts, are the people described as φωνασκοί.

Neglect of these two points can lead to unfortunate misunderstandings. One example which will be familiar to students of Greek musical theory arises in connection with the passages, preserved by Porphyry, in which the writer known as Didymus ὁ μουσικός analyses the methods of various schools of harmonic theory. In the course of his discussion he attributes certain views and practices to people whom he calls οἱ φωνασκικοί; and most scholars who have examined these texts have assumed that he is referring to vocal trainers. In the past I have done so myself.⁴ But for both the reasons I have given this is almost certainly wrong. It overlooks the way in which the word φωνασκικός is typically used, and – more conclusively – it ignores the fact that voice-trainers as such had no professional remit in musical matters and are unlikely to have adopted any particular view about the issues that Didymus is discussing, that is, the means by which we should distinguish the right sizes of intervals, the correct forms of scales, and so on. The φωνασκικοί who, according to Didymus, make these judgements purely on the basis of non-rational habituation must be trained singers, not voice-trainers, and the ὄργανικοί whom he mentions in the same breath must be professional players of instruments. Read in this way the passage makes perfectly intelligible sense.

That was a small digression from the main subject of this essay, but it has at least given me the opportunity to correct an error in one of my previous publications. Let us move on. The best known of all ancient references to vocal training, I suppose, must be the one in chapter 20 of Suetonius' *Life of Nero*. When Nero first got the idea of turning himself into a singer, despite his feeble and husky voice, *exiguæ vocis et fuscae*, he «neglected none of the things which devotees of this kind of discipline did over and over again either to preserve the voice or to strengthen it; these included lying on his back supporting a sheet of lead on his chest, purging himself with enemas and vomiting, and abstaining from harmful fruits and drinks». Here we are clearly in the realm of purely physical techniques, designed, as Suetonius says, to preserve and strengthen the

³ BÉLIS (1999), pp. 186, 191.

⁴ Didymus quoted at Porphyrius *In Ptolemaei Harmonica commentarium* p. 26, 14 Düring; cf. BARKER (1989), p. 242.

voice. They have nothing to do with music as such; but on the other hand they do seem to be designed specifically for singers, and we hear nothing about any comparable exertions in texts about orators. Augustus too had his *phonascus* who taught him how to use his voice as a public speaker and with whom he worked diligently; but there is no suggestion that he went in for exhausting physical labours of the kinds that are attributed to Nero (Suetonius, *Life of Augustus* 84).

A good many writers, all the way up to the rhetorician Choricus in the 6th century AD, give comparable accounts to those of Plato, the *Problem*-writer and Suetonius of the strict diet that singers in training had to observe; it seems to have been the common practice. We seem to get a very different picture from Plutarch: «The *choregoi*», says his speaker, «provide little eels and salads and garlic and bone-marrow for the choristers, and they dine splendidly over a long period, training their voices while living in luxury» (*De gloria Athenensium* 349a). This seems to contradict the commoner depiction of a singer's diet as frugal and austere, but we may be inclined to dismiss the apparent contradiction as illusory. Plutarch puts these words into the mouth of a Spartan. He is talking about the Athens of classical times, not Plutarch's own, and he is criticising the Athenians for the extraordinary amount of effort and expense they put into the performing arts while allegedly neglecting their army and navy. In the passage I have quoted he is contrasting the elaborate diet dispensed to the members of an Athenian chorus with the small and rudimentary rations given to the city's soldiers and sailors. It is patently a piece of tendentious rhetoric, and perhaps it should not be taken at face value. But it is very hard to be sure. There are passages elsewhere which also treat singers as delicate creatures who need a specially designed diet not unlike that described by Plutarch's Spartan. Athenaeus (*Deipnosophistae* 14, 623c), for instance, quotes a description by the fourth century comic poet Clearchus of singers being fed on white eels and all sorts of glutinous foods, since, so he says, they nourish the breath and put flesh on the vocal apparatus (Clearchus fr. 2 Kassel-Austin). More seriously, in the period we are concerned with here, Quintilian also says that singers and orators need different diets; he does not say what they are, but the gist of his remarks in the remainder of the passage is that singers live an enviably soft life by comparison with that of an orator. He says that singers can choose regular times of day for their health-giving walks, unlike orators who have to be ready to work at any time of day or night; and that while orators need above all a strong and resilient voice, what singers need is one that is flexible and delicate, and they coddle and care for it and protect it from strain. He compares people who cultivate beautiful voices with those who are used to exercising and being rubbed down with oil in the gymnasium, who perform splendidly in their own special sport but would soon give up if they had to march on military expeditions and do guard-duties (Quintilian *Institutiones oratoriae* 11, 3, 23-26). Rhetoricians and medical writers in general tend, in fact, to represent a singer's kind of voice-training *both* as dangerously taxing and tough, *and* as much too sheltered and dainty to prepare a person for serious hard work or to promote good health.

Suetonius' reference to Nero's sheet of lead has an interesting parallel in a passage of Galen.⁵ He describes the case of a boy whose chest was underdeveloped by comparison with the rest of his body, and the procedures he adopted in order to improve it. It is a difficult passage, and I cannot be sure that I have completely understood it. But at any rate the procedures included binding the lower part of the boy's chest and his abdomen with bandages, and telling him to do exercises with his arms and to make sounds with his voice of the sort that the φωνασκοί call ἀναφωνήσεις, without allowing his breath to escape; and meanwhile Galen and his assistants pressed on the boy's chest, preventing him from breathing out and forcing the breath to be retained inside. (The ἀναφωνήσεις to which Galen refers were vocalisations used by singers as warming-up exercises before a performance, as we learn from a writer of the same period, Phrynichus the grammarian, *Praeparatio sophistica* 106). A brief phrase in the passage seems to mean that the sounds were to be made on small intakes of breath, producing an even greater expansion of the chest; this would explain how the boy's ἀναφωνήσεις could be uttered without any escape of breath from his body. These procedures will be most successful, Galen says, if the sounds are made loudly and at a high pitch; and the person undergoing the treatment should draw in as much breath as he can, to expand his chest to the greatest possible extent. Presumably the treatment used on the boy was repeated many times, and if we are to believe Galen, it worked; he recommends these procedures to anyone wishing to improve his physique, unless he is very old, in which case he should avoid them. We may reasonably guess that Nero, a century earlier, had to do much the same sort of thing, with the lead sheet as a substitute for the exertions of Galen and his assistants.

There is further evidence that voice-training involved a very harsh physical regime in a number of other passages from the medical writers. Galen tells us, for instance, that people who start either athletic or vocal training from too early an age become incapable of sex, and their genitals become thin and wrinkled like those of old men (*De locis affectis* p. 451 Kühn). Soranus, another doctor more or less contemporary with Galen, gives a very similar impression of what could happen to women. The menstrual discharge, he says, is greater in women who lead a leisured life, and smaller in those who take part in athletics or go in for voice-training. It can in fact stop altogether, not only because of old age, but as the result of a woman's engaging in φωνασκία at a professional level, φωνασκία ἀγωνιστική, which uses up all the available matter; and in some cases the women become completely man-like, ἀνδρώδεις (Soranus *Gynaecia* 1, 22, 6; *ibid.* 1, 23, 1). The notion that female professional singers grew to look like the great Tamara Press or some other stereotypical Russian woman athlete may seem bizarre, but the comparison with athletes is common, and passages like these are eloquent testimony to the exhausting physical exertions and deprivations that singers were expected to undertake, not only during their apprenticeship but throughout their

⁵ Galen *De sanitate tuenda* pp. 358-359 Kühn.

careers. Thus Claudius Aelianus reports, for instance, that Diogenes the tragedy-singer renounced all «licentious bedding», and that though the *kitharōidos* Amoibeus had a gorgeous young wife he never had sex with her. Quintilian, too, asserts that sexual abstinence is essential for both singers and orators, so that they can preserve their strength.⁶

So much for the general regime imposed by voice-trainers on their clients. Several other rather general points can be extracted from the sources, for instance that singers always did warming-up exercises before performing, and that just as wrestlers get rubbed down with oil by their trainers before competing, singers «soften their wind-pipes in preparation» during this warming-up procedure; the writer probably means that they too rub their throats with oil.⁷ But we would like to know also about the exact nature of the exercises they did with the voice itself, and here the evidence is rather thin. There is some, however, and we can start from a tiny scrap of information in Ptolemy's *Harmonics* (3, 10, p. 105, 6-11 Düring). The lowest notes of the voice, he says, are closest to silence, and that is where vocal sound both begins and ends. «Hence οἱ φωνασκοῦντες start their singing from the lowest notes and end on them as they finish». There is nothing surprising about that, of course; modern singers typically do just the same when they are practising, singing up a scale from the bottom to the top and then back down again. The picture of singers running up and down scales, and trying to bring the voice to perfection all through its range, reappears quite commonly in our sources, and is often distinguished sharply from the exercises suitable for orators or to preserve a person's health, which should not use very low pitches and must especially avoid very high ones.⁸ Cicero has some characteristic remarks on the subject.

What is as essential to an orator as the voice? Yet I would advise no one who cultivates the art of speaking to train his voice in the manner of Greek tragedy-singers, who sit for many years practising delivery, and every day, before they begin to speak, gradually arouse their voices while lying in bed; and when they have done that they sit up and make their voices run down from the highest to the lowest level, in some way joining the highest and the lowest together. If we orators decided to do that, the people whose causes we have taken on will have been condemned before we have finished reciting a paean or a hymn as many times as is prescribed. (*De oratore* 1, 251)

One writer's prescriptions for exercises to promote bodily health in general, however, include details which seem to correspond rather closely to those that are elsewhere reserved for singers; and if in his work the boundary between the two sorts of regime was less clear-cut than it is in other writings, as this

⁶ Claudius Aelianus *Varia historia* 3, 30; Quintilian *Institutiones oratoriae* 11, 3, 19.

⁷ Phrynichus grammaticus *Praeparatio sophistica* 106; Alexander Aphrodisiensis *Problemata* 1, 119.

⁸ See for instance Quintilian *Institutiones oratoriae* 2, 9, 15; 11, 3, 22 and 41; Oribasius *Collectiones medicae* 6, 9, 1-6; Antyllus quoted at Oribasius *Collectiones medicae* 6, 1, 23.

correspondence suggests, his account may give us a fair picture of one aspect of the discipline that singers undertook. It deserves to be quoted in full. It is concerned with the ‘warming-up’ exercises known as ἀναφωνήσεις.

A person who is about to ἀναφωνεῖν should relax the hollow channels and rub them lightly, especially the lower parts, and sponge or wash his face gently while making quiet preliminary murmurings, extending them moderately; and it is better if he also begins by walking about. Then he can proceed to ἀναφώνησις. If he has some education, let him utter (ἀναφωνεῖτω) things he can remember, both those that he thinks elegant and those that involve many transitions between smoothness and roughness. If he has no knowledge of epic, let him perform iambics; let elegiacs have the third place and lyric poetry the fourth. It is better for the person uttering (τὸν ἀναφωνοῦντα) to recite from memory than to read. He should begin to utter (ἀναφωνεῖν) from the lowest notes, relaxing the voice as much as possible, and then proceed up to the highest; and then, without spending long at high pitch he should turn back down again, lowering the voice gradually, until we reach the lowest pitch, from which we began. The measure must be taken from the individual’s capacity and his degree of enthusiasm and experience. (Oribasius *Collectiones medicae* 6, 9, 1-6)

It is worth paying attention also to Cicero’s phrases about «gradually arousing their voices», and «in some way joining the highest and the lowest together», in the passage of the *De oratore* quoted above. What he means is not altogether clear, but our sources seem to find something odd about the aspect of a singer’s training that involves taking the voice through a sequence of very slight changes in pitch. The medical writer Antyllus, for instance, dismisses, as unhelpful for his therapeutic purposes, not only τὴν τῶν ὀξυτέρων φθόγγων γυμνασίαν, «exercise on the higher notes», but also τὴν ἄχρηστον ἀπὸ τῶν ὑπάτων κατὰ μικρὸν ἐπίτασιν ἢ τὴν παραυξήσεως φιλοτεχνίαν, «the useless increase in pitch from the lowest notes by small steps, or the special technique of gradual augmentation». These practices only create εὐμέλεια and χρηστοφωνία, «melodiousness and a fine voice», attributes that contribute nothing to health (quoted at Oribasius *Collectiones medicae* 6, 10, 7).

Perhaps the key to understanding these comments can be found in passages such as one in a letter of Seneca the Younger, where he is discussing the physical regime that a philosopher should adopt to keep himself in good condition. He recommends walking, exercising the arms with weights, high-jumping and long-jumping, and an exercise that he describes as something like the dance of the Sali, or the actions of washing-men who pound clothes in a tub with their feet – he may perhaps be thinking of running on the spot. Nor, he says, should one neglect the voice. But he absolutely forbids [*vocem*] *per gradus et certos modos extollere, deinde deprimere*, «raising and then lowering the voice by steps and in specific *modi*»; I take the words «in specific *modi*» to mean «through determinate intervals» or «following the sequences of particular scales». That, he goes on, is like getting a special trainer to teach you how to walk; before you know

where you are, he will be changing the sizes of your steps and watching over everything you eat. We should remember that our purpose is not to exercise the voice, but for the voice to exercise us (Seneca *Epistulae ad Lucilium* 15, 4-8). Singers concerned with the improvement and preservation of their vocal powers, of course, would no doubt have subscribed to the opposite of Seneca's last contention, submitting more or less willingly to the disciplines which their trainers imposed, however unnatural they might seem, since the whole purpose of their practices was to exercise and strengthen their voices. Perhaps then, though this is not what they explicitly say, what the doctors and rhetoricians are really objecting to in a singer's vocal training are not the gradual changes in pitch as such. It is the fact that the singer has to produce them in the manner which musical writers (and some others too) call διαστηματική κίνησις, the "intervallic motion" characteristic of melody, rather than the "continuous motion", συνεχής κίνησις, used in speech; and that in doing so he is confined to precisely specified intervals in the voice's upwards and downwards movements. (This may be what Seneca has in mind when he refers sarcastically to a trainer regulating the size of a person's steps). All the orthodox rhetoricians agree that this 'sing-song' style of delivery is inappropriate to public speaking; it is an 'oriental' fashion which some orators have adopted, but is sapping the manly strength of proper forensic and political rhetoric. If we allow that kind of delivery, says Quintilian, we might as well go the whole hog and accompany our speeches with lyres and *tibiae*, or even cymbals, which would in fact be even more appropriate to these atrocities (*Institutiones oratoriae* 11, 3, 57-9; cf. Cicero *Orator* 57).

Much more could be said about the techniques used by orators, of course; a good deal of information can be extracted, for example, from Quintilian *Institutiones oratoriae* 11, 3, from which I have already quoted several times, together with the passages on rhetorical delivery in Cicero *De oratore*, especially 3, 56-61. There is also plenty more to discover from the medical sources about the use of vocal training in improving and preserving one's health. They talk about deep-breathing exercises, for instance, and offer a great many recipes for soothing and curing sore throats, some of which were probably used by singers as much as by anyone else. We get a hint of some early evidence of this from Antiphon's speech *On the Choreutes*, in which a man defends himself against the charge of having poisoned a member of his chorus, and again from Theophrastus, who speaks of the juice of the plant called πανάκης, «All-heal», as good for φωνασκία, as well as for the the ears and for the pains of miscarriages and spasms (*Historia plantarum* 9, 9, 2). A typical prescription is one which Galen attributes to one of his predecessors, the doctor Crito; it involved sweet Cretan wine mixed with spices such as myrrh and frankincense, boiled down to a syrup, which sounds rather more appealing than many mixtures to be found in a modern pharmacist's shop.⁹

⁹ On breathing techniques see especially Antyllus quoted at Oribasius *Collectiones medicae* 6, 10; for a large selection of recipes for medicines to soothe the throat see Galen *De compositione medicamentorum secundum locos* p. 35 ff. Kühn, which contains a long list of potions prescribed by

What I have not so far been able to find, however, except perhaps in the passage quoted above from Oribasius, are more precise details about φωνασκία for singers. This is not really surprising, since the great majority of writers on music in this period are concerned almost exclusively with harmonic theory; the rhetoricians and doctors quite naturally say no more about the singers' specialised techniques than is needed to distinguish them from their own; and most of the more broadly «cultural» texts belong to the environment of the Second Sophistic, which are designed in large part to glorify the Greek culture of classical times, typically echoing the rather snobbish attitude to specialised forms of physical exertion and training which we find, for instance, in Plato. But we can at least be sure that in the Roman world of the late Republic and the Empire, the work of a professional singer, and of anyone who aspired to become one, involved a great deal of persistent hard labour which was clearly distinguished from their specifically musical activities; that they used physical exercises, medical prescriptions and even mechanical aids – like Nero's lead sheet – to strengthen and discipline their breathing apparatus; that their vocal exercises were much more elaborate and specialised than those recommended for orators; and at the same time that they treated their voices and their bodies in general with a delicate care which earned them the rhetoricians' contempt. I cannot claim to have examined every possible source, and further research may be able to reveal more details of their regime. But even in the absence of such details it seems clear that the physical disciplines to which singers were subjected in this period of antiquity were at least as demanding and technically specialised as those undergone by their modern counterparts.

other doctors, with Galen's comments. For a review of our information about the kinds of vocal quality expected of professional singers, and for some speculations on the subject, see WEST (1992), pp. 39-47.

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