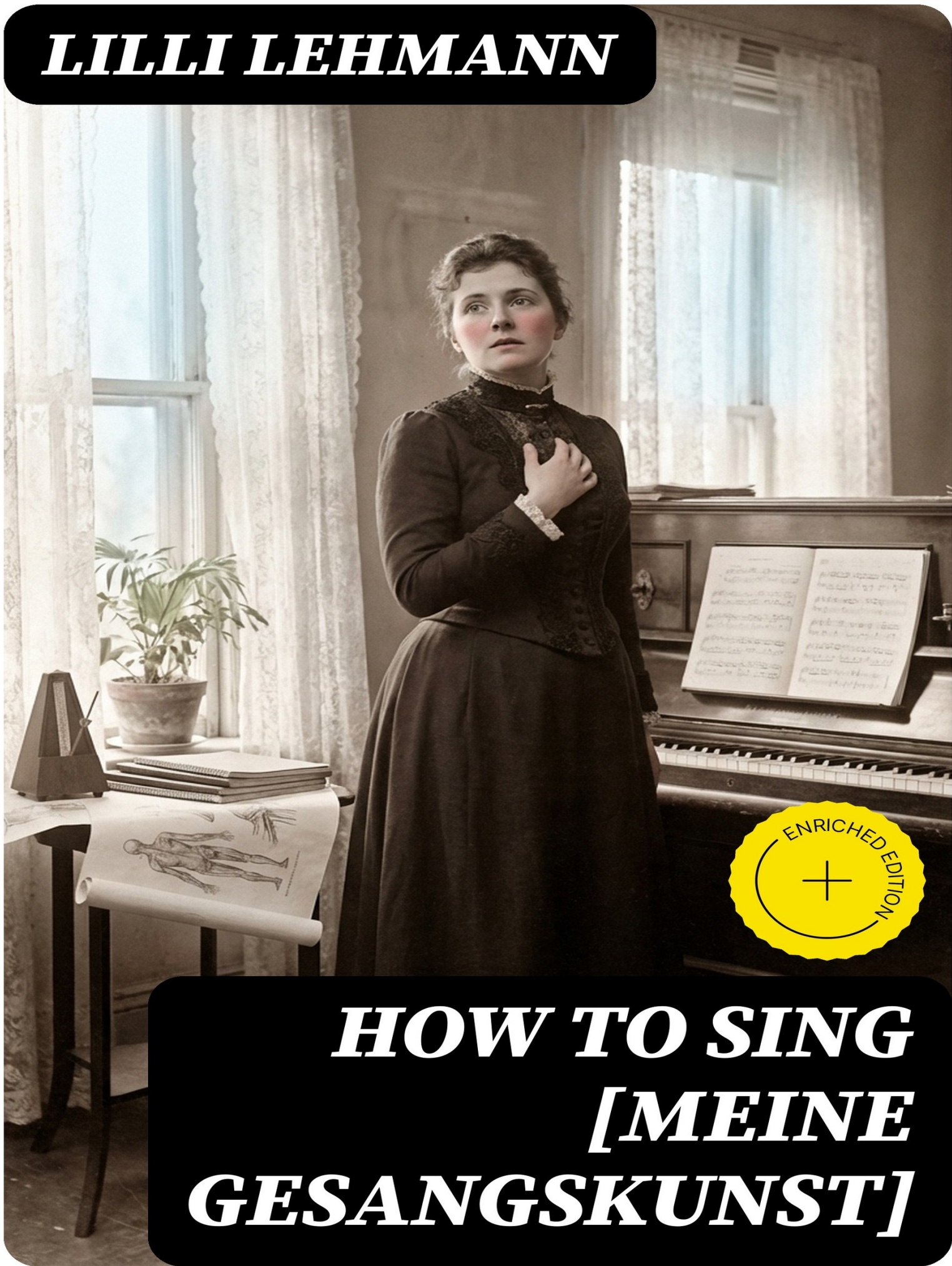


LILLI LEHMANN



**HOW TO SING
[MEINE
GESANGSKUNST]**

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How to Sing [Meine Gesangskunst]

Enriched edition.

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Sadie Whitlock

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Introduction

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At once a practical manual and an artistic creed, *How to Sing* (Meine Gesangskunst) turns on the enduring paradox that the most natural, expressive tone arises from the most deliberate, embodied discipline, asking readers to reconcile breath, body, language, and imagination into a unified act of communication while resisting both mechanistic shortcuts and vague mysticism, and in doing so it frames vocal technique not as a collection of tricks but as a moral and aesthetic practice that shapes an artist's character, attention, and choices in the studio and onstage every time a phrase is formed, supported, colored, balanced, and released into an attentive, resonant space.

Belonging to the tradition of vocal pedagogy, this book was written by the German soprano Lilli Lehmann, whose international career spanned the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and first appeared as *Meine Gesangskunst* in German before reaching readers in English as *How to Sing* in the early twentieth century. Its context is the opera stage and rehearsal studio, where Lehmann forged her views on technique, style, and professional preparation. The work stands at the intersection of performance experience and didactic clarity, offering a historical vantage on training methods that shaped singers across European and American musical centers.

The premise is practical: to guide readers toward a healthy, flexible, and expressive voice built on measurable habits and sustained attention. The reading experience is intimate

and exacting, with a voice that speaks like a seasoned teacher in the studio—confident, precise, and unsentimental, yet attentive to the individuality of each instrument. Lehmann’s style combines concrete physiological references with descriptions of sensation and function, moving from principles to applications. The tone is rigorous but never obscure, and the prose favors clarity over ornament, inviting readers to test ideas at the keyboard, in careful practice, and within the acoustics of real rooms.

Without reducing singing to anatomy alone, the book systematically treats foundational elements that underpin artistry. Lehmann addresses breath management as the engine of tone, the coordination of registers, the cultivation of resonance, and the shaping of vowels and consonants for legato and intelligibility. She considers agility and power as complementary rather than opposing aims, links dynamic control to mental focus, and regards diction as a carrier of musical meaning. Throughout, she insists on consistent practice habits that develop steadiness, flexibility, and endurance, always subordinating display to expressive intent and aligning technical choices with stylistic understanding.

A central theme is the union of body, intellect, and imagination. Technique, for Lehmann, is a disciplined way of listening and feeling that enables truthful expression rather than a display of virtuosity for its own sake. The book also explores the ethics of craft—respect for the score and text, responsibility to audiences, and humility before the repertoire. Another persistent idea is individuality: voices differ, and method must adapt without abandoning first principles. Tradition is treated as a living resource, not a constraint, guiding singers to marry inherited wisdom with their own evolving capacities.

For contemporary readers, the book matters because it translates large aesthetic questions into repeatable, sustainable practices. In an age crowded with quick fixes and conflicting advice, Lehmann's steady emphasis on breath, resonance, and clear language offers a durable framework that supports longevity across styles. Her insistence on mindful work speaks to classical soloists, choral singers, teachers, and anyone who relies on the voice professionally. Even where terminology has shifted, the core insights—that healthy function frees expression, that attention shapes sound, and that craft deepens communication—remain immediately applicable in studios, classrooms, rehearsal halls, and performance spaces.

Approached today, *How to Sing* rewards slow reading and thoughtful experimentation. Its historical vantage invites comparison with modern voice science, yet its practical counsel stands on its own: listen closely, work patiently, and align purpose with method. Lehmann's prose conveys the atmosphere of a lesson rather than an abstract lecture, encouraging readers to observe, adjust, and internalize technique through consistent, reflective practice. As an introduction to vocal art and a mirror for seasoned performers, the book endures as a living document—one that teaches how to build a voice and, just as importantly, how to shape a musical conscience.

Synopsis

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How to Sing (Meine Gesangskunst) by Lilli Lehmann presents a systematic account of vocal training from the perspective of a renowned operatic soprano. Originally published in German and later available in English, the work blends technical instruction with the author's reflections on the responsibilities of artistic interpretation. Lehmann frames singing as a disciplined craft grounded in bodily awareness, clear acoustical aims, and careful listening. She argues that dependable technique is inseparable from expressive truth, and that progress depends on patient, verifiable practice rather than fashionable slogans. Throughout, she emphasizes inner sensations that can be consistently reproduced, linking them to audible results a listener can judge objectively.

Lehmann begins with posture and breath as the basis of the entire technique. She describes an upright, unforced alignment that allows the ribs and abdominal wall to cooperate in a steady, economical management of air. Inhalation must be quiet and ample, avoiding lifted shoulders or collapsed chest. Exhalation, she maintains, should neither push nor leak but flow with measured steadiness, supplying tone without throat pressure. This discipline underpins a reliable onset, dynamic control, and endurance. The singer's first tasks are to cultivate stillness in the body, constancy in the breath, and the mental concentration to maintain these while shaping musical phrases.

From breath, the argument moves to resonance and tone focus. Lehmann explains how the soft palate, pharynx, mouth, and nasal cavities form adjustable resonators that color and project the voice. She encourages sensations that lift and widen internal spaces while preserving a clean, vibrant core to the tone. Sympathetic nasal resonance is welcomed for brilliance, but a nasalized sound is discouraged. By coordinating these chambers, the singer balances brightness and depth, secures intonation, and refines timbre across dynamics. The aim is a stable tonal focus that the singer can feel in consistent places, allowing nuanced shading without sacrificing clarity or carrying power.

A central theme is the management and unification of registers. Lehmann distinguishes regions of the voice—commonly termed chest, middle, and head—and insists they must be blended so that no audible breaks remain. She recommends methodical work through transitional notes with gentle dynamics, attentive vowel shaping, and steady breath to equalize color and response. Laryngeal freedom and a poised onset help prevent strain. Exercises such as sustained tones, scale patterns, and controlled crescendos develop both agility and firmness. The singer learns to shift resonance gradually rather than suddenly, achieving a continuous scale that can adapt to different styles and volumes.

Articulation and language receive detailed treatment. Lehmann regards vowels as the carriers of tone and consonants as the sculptors of intelligibility; both must cooperate without disrupting the breath. She discusses how vowel modifications support pitch and resonance, and how consonants can be energized forward in the mouth to keep the tone spinning. Attention to rhythm, accent, and the natural inflection of words guides phrasing. She urges slow,

precise practice of text to ensure clarity at tempo. The result is diction that enhances musical expression, enabling the singer to communicate meaning while preserving legato and maintaining the instrument's resonance.

Lehmann extends technique into artistry, practice habits, and vocal health. She advocates measured routines that alternate focused effort with rest, warning against fatigue, hurried progress, or indiscriminate repertoire. Careful warm-ups, consistent daily work, and honest self-monitoring are emphasized. Interpretation is grounded in the score but animated by personal conviction, with dynamics, tempo, and coloring chosen to serve character and style. She addresses stage comportment, ensemble awareness, and the discipline required in rehearsal. Teachers, in her view, should foster independence by training the singer's ear and self-knowledge rather than imposing rigid formulas.

The treatise concludes by affirming a holistic, sustainable approach that links technique, expression, and longevity. Lehmann's synthesis—uniting breath economy, resonant focus, register balance, clear diction, and thoughtful musicianship—offers a flexible foundation applicable across varied repertoires. Avoiding fads, she argues for principles that can be tested by sound and sensation alike, giving singers tools to diagnose and refine their work over time. *How to Sing* endures in vocal pedagogy for its practical clarity and its insistence that beauty, intelligibility, and stamina arise from the same disciplined method, preserving the voice while expanding its artistic possibilities.

Historical Context

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How to Sing (Meine Gesangskunst) emerged from the German-speaking operatic world that matured after mid-19th-century unification and institutional growth. Lilli Lehmann, born in 1848 and trained chiefly by her mother, debuted in Prague during the 1860s before joining Berlin's Court Opera. The period saw a dense network of royal and municipal theaters across Prussia, Bavaria, and Austria, with standardized seasons, house orchestras, and permanent ensembles. Conservatories and court theaters in Berlin and Vienna shaped expectations for technique, repertoire, and discipline. Lehmann's early career in these institutions placed her within a professional culture that prized reliability, text clarity, and stylistic versatility across German and Italian works.

In 1876 Richard Wagner inaugurated the Bayreuth Festival, dedicated to his music dramas and to new staging and orchestral practices. Lehmann sang at Bayreuth's first festival, participating in the Ring cycle's premiere performances. Wagner's scores, larger orchestras, and concealed pit demanded sustained breath control, even projection, and careful management of vocal registers. These artistic and acoustic conditions reoriented European vocal ideals, challenging singers trained in lighter bel canto roles to adapt. As Bayreuth quickly influenced major houses in Berlin, Vienna, London, and beyond, Lehmann's firsthand experience with Wagnerian technique informed her later insistence on disciplined resonance and efficiency in performance.

Transatlantic opera expanded rapidly in the late nineteenth century. New York's Metropolitan Opera opened in 1883 and adopted extended "German seasons" soon afterward. Lehmann joined the Metropolitan in 1885, singing leading Wagner and Mozart roles and working with conductors associated with the Wagner tradition. American audiences, impresarios, and critics increasingly compared European and U.S. standards, sharpening debates about language, rehearsal rigor, and ensemble balance. The Metropolitan's resources, large auditorium, and touring engagements required voices that could travel and sustain demanding schedules. Lehmann's prominence in New York helped position her as an authority whose technical prescriptions would speak to singers on both continents.

The book also belongs to a crowded late-nineteenth-century pedagogical literature. Italianate bel canto lineages, represented by teachers like Francesco and Giovanni Battista Lamperti and Mathilde Marchesi, emphasized legato, agility, and appoggio. German and Austrian institutions complemented that heritage with close attention to diction, declamation, and orchestral integration. Lehmann trained within both traditions through her diverse repertoire, from Mozart to Wagner and Bellini. *How to Sing* intervenes in ongoing debates about registers, breath, and resonance by offering a practitioner's synthesis, shaped by major state theaters rather than studio abstraction. It situates vocal technique as a practical response to repertory and venue.

Scientific inquiry into the voice had grown steadily alongside this pedagogical discourse. Manuel García's invention of the laryngoscope in 1854 enabled direct observation of the vocal folds, while Hermann von Helmholtz's 1863 acoustical studies reframed tone and resonance in measurable terms. By the 1890s and early 1900s, journals, conservatories, and clinics disseminated anatomical diagrams and experimental

findings to teachers and performers. Early commercial recordings and improved music printing widened access to exemplars and methods. Lehmann's treatise uses contemporary physiological vocabulary selectively, anchoring it in stage experience; it reflects a moment when empirical science and artistic tradition were negotiating common ground.

Performance practice shifted markedly in the 1880s–1900s. Wagner's concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Bayreuth's covered pit, and darkened auditoriums recalibrated balances between stage and orchestra. In Vienna, Gustav Mahler's tenure at the Court Opera (1897–1907) heightened ensemble discipline, continuity of gesture, and textual fidelity—trends echoed across European houses. Orchestras expanded in size and dynamic range, and houses standardized rehearsal protocols. Such changes increased physical demands on singers, especially in long Wagner and late-Romantic roles. Lehmann's emphasis on economy of effort, poised breath, and resonance alignment addresses these institutional realities rather than studio idealism, presenting technique as survival strategy and artistic conscience.

Women occupied prominent public roles in opera as virtuosi and pedagogues while facing institutional constraints. By 1900, international stars such as Lilli Lehmann commanded major stages and helped shape repertory choices. Honors like the title of *Kammersängerin* recognized sustained artistic service within court theaters. Teaching became a parallel avenue of influence, especially for retired or semi-retired prima donnas who codified methods for younger singers. Lehmann's authority thus derived from decades of leading performances and from mentorship in Berlin and New York. Her written voice in *How to Sing*

exemplifies a respected female practitioner articulating standards to a widening, professional readership.

Published in 1902 and widely read in German and English soon after, *How to Sing* offered a codified account of Lehmann's practice at a transitional moment in operatic history. It advocates disciplined breath management, careful register negotiation, and flexible resonance as means to meet late-Romantic orchestral forces without sacrificing clarity or style. The book reflects its era's institutional frameworks—court theaters, festivals, and transatlantic companies—and engages contemporary debates shaped by Wagnerism, bel canto pedagogy, and emerging voice science. Its enduring reception lies in how it translates stage-tested solutions into general principles, critiquing excess and fashion while defending craft as the singer's foundation.

How to Sing [Meine Gesangskunst]

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