

## The Lady of the Deep C. – Specialist suggests she may double her power

Unsigned article in *The Daily Express*, 19 October 1904, p. 5.  
The eminent throat and nose specialist referred to is in all probability Dr R. Henry Scanes-Spicer (1856–1925).

### HOW TO BREATHE

‘Good morning! Have you got your lower C with you?’

Such is the salutation dreaded by Miss Violet Elliott, the Australian contralto with the phenomenally deep voice who is now appearing at the Alhambra.

Yesterday found her more than ever embarrassed at being described as a ‘lady bass’, but her spirits rose when she was told that one of London’s most eminent throat and nose specialists wished to examine her vocal chords.

At the specialist’s house a fresh surprise was in store for her. Mr F. M. Alexander, the elocutionist, himself an Australian, was there to greet her, and incidentally to discover ‘how she breathed.’ For Mr Alexander, who was unknown to the specialist until a month ago, has been working for many years on exactly the same lines as the great physican himself in respect to proper breathing.

Both these men are convinced that the chief cause of the physical deterioration of the people of this country and also of half their illnesses is their method of breathing.

And while they talked, and while Mr Alexander’s chest svelled without any perceptible sign upon his face of his having taken a long breath, Miss Elliott’s fresh Colonial enthusiasm rose, and she became more and more certain that she, too, did not breathe correctly. And she was partly right.

### SPECIALIST PUZZLED

After pouring forth a flood of deep rich notes, Mr Alexander stopped her with the remark, ‘I could double your power and do away with all the physical or nervous strain you put upon yourself now.’

This was too much for Miss Elliott. 'Then they'll call me the double-base lady,' she cried, as she sank into the doctor's chair to have her larynx examined by mirror and 'searchlight'.

The examination thoroughly puzzled the specialist. 'There is nothing abnormal in the vocal chords,' he said at last.

'In the case of men with deep bass voices the chords are broad, rough-edged, and unusually long. These are pearly white, clean-cut and of the usual length. The dental arch is perfect, the chest is magnificent. The only way I can account for Miss Elliott's phenomenal voice is that she has always breathed through her nose, has led a healthy outdoor life in Australia and instinctively holds herself while standing in the ideal way. But she does not know to breathe yet, or how best to use her extraordinary powers.'

At Miss Elliott's suggestion Mr Alexander than propounded the system which he firmly believes would regenerate the race were it universally adopted.

Briefly, it was this. The average man or woman believes that to take a long breath it is desirable to suck in air by the mouth, thereby increasing the atmospheric pressure on the lungs. Mr Alexander says this pressure would be brought down to a minimum, that the mouth should be closed whenever possible, and that the nasal passages should be dilated to their full extent.

#### BREATHE THROUGH THE NOSE

The primary movement of breathing must be thoracic – that is, the thorax or chest-box must be expanded naturally without drawing in any breath by suction. The thorax must be made as mobile as possible.

'In so-called physical culture,' added Mr Alexander, 'the man who develops a great chest measurement thinks he is immensely improved in health. But the very reverse is the case. The muscles over the chest are developed, but unless the man knows how to breathe the thorax remains rigid and he is exposed to all attacks from the air.'

'I studied the Maoris at closer quarters for twelve months. They are magnificent specimens, and perfect breathers. The squaws of the North American Indian tribes hold their children's lips in order to train them to breathe through the nasal passages.'

Mr Alexander has defied not only a serious nasal obstruction, but a 'vaulted palate,' from which he suffered at birth, by his system of breathing.

With Mr Alexander's system the specialist entirely agreed. 'The lung and heart troubles, the adenoids, the bronchial complaints, the spinal

weakness, and the generally defective physique of our population can in the majority of cases be attributed to ignorance of the art of breathing', he said.

#### PUFFY ALDERMEN

'Take the average alderman, for instance. His mouth is open, his thorax rigid and fallen in, while his short breathing is abdominal. A puff of cold air is sufficient to lay him up with bronchitis or something worse.'

As a very fair musical critic, the specialist took Miss Elliott in hand once more and, leading her to the piano, watched her closely as she went down the scale to the lower D. But Miss Elliott did not stop at the D. She sank to C in a resonating voice which astounded her little audience.

That Miss Elliott's voice is remarkable is shown by the following table, drawn up by Hoole in his *Physiology of the Voice*. The three registers are given as the widest compass in the voices of sopranos, mezzo-sopranos, and contraltos. The register represent, roughly, two octaves.

The first starts with C and ends with the high C. The second commences with A and ends with G sharp, and the third commences with F and ends with F.



Miss Elliott not only sang the lower C in a full rich voice, but took the high G sharp of the mezzo with the greatest ease.

A professor of singing who was spoken to on the subject declared that the test was certainly a remarkable one when the quality of the voice was considered.

'But it is absurd to talk of a 'lady bass,' as bass notes are exactly an octave below those of contralto, just as tenor's notes are an octave below those of a soprano.

#### Endnote

On 22 October 1904, the *Cheltenham Chronicle and Gloucestershire Graphic* reported that "Miss Violet Elliott, an Australian contralto with a voice of phenomenal depth, made a successful first appearance at the Alhambra, London, on Monday." *Ed.*