

The Voice and Its Metaphors

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Singing teachers talk of themselves and the work they do in many different ways. I have heard the role of singing teacher described variously as 'an acolyte to the angels', and 'a mug's game' ... and many things in between. A singing teacher's work, in essence, is to enhance students' skills and sensitivities in a range of artistic and neuromuscular tasks, all arising from the ability of the human larynx to provide a subtle array of sounds. Yet to many students, the larynx and its associated structures remain an enigma. This secretive organ, hidden within its cartilaginous castle in the neck, is hard to quantify. Few teachers, and even fewer students, have seen a real one — their own or anyone else's. I believe that it is for this reason that, for better, or perhaps worse, singing teaching has become encrusted with metaphor.

The mind is inherently embodied.

Thought is mostly unconscious.

Abstract concepts are largely metaphorical.

This is how Lakoff and Johnson (1999) begin their latest book. These aphorisms are all useful when considering the work involved in teaching, but the third of these is especially apposite for singing teaching, a field of endeavour that is filled with abstract concepts. The idea, 'Abstract concepts are largely metaphorical', stems from Lakoff and Johnson's earlier work (1980), where they argue that, since metaphors reflect the way people think about things, they often 'create realities for us ... and may thus be a guide for further action' (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). George Lakoff, a linguist, and Mark Johnson, a philosopher, together take a cognitive-linguistic approach to metaphor, observing 'Metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but also in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature'.

These considerations suggested that, because of the ubiquity of metaphor in our language, it might be impossible (but inadvisable) to eliminate metaphor from singing teachers' discourse on voices. A lively paper by Carol-Lynne Moore (1987) which discussed the ways dancers viewed their own bodies steered me towards a different focus in the matter of metaphor — how singing students see their own voices, and how their internalised metaphors may assist or hinder the teaching process.

A student enters your studio expressing the wish to learn to sing, or to improve their singing voice. How do they see the voice they bring into the room with them? Is it inextricably identified with their selves? Do they see it as an adjunct — a sort of semi-detached portion of them — or is it entirely other to them, a

separate entity, complete in itself, with whom they occasionally communicate? The way in which students view their voices may modify the effectiveness of their teacher's approach ... and it's worth wondering whether their teachers are aware of this dynamic in the teaching relationship. In addition, how does the teacher view her/his own voice? Boiled down to its bones, the question then is: when the singing student and teacher are in the studio, how many entities are in the room — two, three or four?

I have hypothesised a number of metaphoric approaches that singers may have to their own voice; they are all based on students with whom I have worked over the past 25 years. After describing the presenting symptoms, I have included within each point some discussion regarding the learning opportunities and problems offered by each viewpoint.

The Voice as Anatomy

My voice is muscle, tendon, cartilage, bone, nerve tissue and mucous membrane.

This is the singer who needs to have a clear anatomical grasp of the properties and functions of the vocal tract and all the associated physical appurtenances which aid the task of singing. The evangelistic work of Jo Estill has nourished the needs of thousands of these singers. Students with this mindset may exhibit a tendency to imagine their voices as mechanical entities. This viewpoint often leads to an irrational impatience with their vocal equipment when it fails to function as efficiently as required, especially when the cause(s) include emotional and/or spiritual stressors.

Teachers working with these students may need to remind them of the constant connection between voice, body and soul, and the many factors which contribute to a finely sung sound which are not of physical origin. Technical instruction will need to be firmly based in structure/function for these students — they are usually allergic to metaphor.

The Voice as an Art Object

My voice is a work of art.

When students hold this view of their voice, teaching needs to be both firm and utterly unambiguous. A sense of preciousness can often result in students being unwilling to make sounds that they perceive as 'ugly' as part of their vocal development. In vain, teachers describe the benefits to be gained by pursuing the voice work suggested: the aesthetically stubborn student will balk at making sounds which seem to them to be regressive — training their voices away from their internalised concepts of beauty and art. The

usual end of this *impasse* scenario is the quiet departure of the student.

The teacher who can navigate subtly around passionately held views of vocal beauty (some more silly than others) by enticing the student to even greater aesthetic heights will keep them artistically aware while building a stronger and more realistic awareness of where the student is, where Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau is, and what actually needs to be done to bridge the gulf.

A steady diet of listening to wonderful voices and regular recording (either video or audio) of the student's best work, may be a useful reality check. Asking the student to draw how they perceive their voices, perhaps at six-monthly intervals, also serves as an effective indicator for both teacher and student, because it taps into subconscious levels of the student's self-perception.

The Voice as Identifier

My voice is me.

Telephones are the best model for this voice viewpoint. We lift the receiver and listen, and often know in an instant who our caller is. The voice identifies the person as we hear it, and we continue to talk with the caller as if they were present in the room with us.

When singing students relate so strongly to their own voices, to the extent that they feel that the force of their own selves resides within their voices, teaching becomes a dangerous task. So much self-worth is invested in the sung sound that any criticism is taken as an entirely personal slight. The teacher is seen as an opponent rather than a facilitator, and if this is not resolved, there is usually an early parting of the ways.

Students for whom voice *is* self have often performed since childhood and gained praise from parents, friends and teachers for their singing. Perhaps they have come to the singing teacher simply to learn new repertoire or extend their range; they can be quite put out when something less than wholesale acceptance of their vocal technique is evidenced. This is enough to confuse well-meaning teachers; don't we all earn our honest crust by listening critically and offering careful advice about changing vocal habits in order to improve the quality of sung sound?

When the frailty of a performer's ego is at risk, the teacher's best refuge is affirmation of the good bits, silence about the bad bits, and wise selection of repertoire which the student will love to learn, but will find impossible to perform without improving the technical problems present within their voice. Any practice that aids the development of objectivity in the student will help here.

The Voice as Artefact

I made my voice what it is.

These students differ from those of the 'voice as identifier' class; they tend not to believe that their essential selves are identified by their voices. They do, however, maintain a dogged belief in their task of single-handedly building their own voices. The greatest fear they have is that their singing teacher will

place an indelible stamp on their vocal quality that will somehow negate the uniqueness of the voice that they have carefully constructed.

'Don't make me sound different' is a puzzling instruction for any singing teacher to receive. It is the request that any 'voice as artefact' singer would make. This is the student who will question any instruction that may refer to another person's vocal quality. They will resist any suggestion to try to sing the legato passage as smoothly as (Frank Sinatra? Renata Tebaldi?) do. When the teacher demonstrates a technical skill for them to emulate, they will often block the offered information and make resentful comments about needing to sound like themselves and no-one else, thank you. Responses of this kind can frequently puzzle singing teachers, leading them to suspect the student is unteachably arrogant.

The student's viewpoint is rooted in great fear that their uniqueness is under threat. This is particularly so in the contemporary commercial music area, where fashions in pop vocal style change frequently and singers need to offer a sound that conforms to current tastes while still being identifiably unique. I have had singers interested in working in this genre confess to me that they had put off learning to sing for some years, for fear that the more they learnt the less they would be acceptable within the commercial world of contemporary commercial music. One student, greatly fearing the loss of his own sound, asked me to teach him 'the breathing stuff' but not too much else, please.

Teachers confronted with fears of this kind, either expressed or implicit, can start by reassuring their students that good singing training merely enables and enhances the student's own voice, and never fabricates an artificial voice that is not recognisably theirs. An emphasis on the technical necessities underpinning the timbre may help to allay the anxieties of a 'Voice as Artefact' student. Although the teacher knows that regular attention to such matters as breath management and posture will improve the timbral quality of the student's voice, this approach may be seen by the student as less likely to impinge on their sound than direct instructions relating to adjusting tone. The canny teacher who approaches the training of these anxious students in this way can make a big difference to their stamina, skill and artistry without unnecessary confrontation.

The Voice as a Tool

It's just there to do a job.

When singers individuate themselves from their voices, their language is usually a good indicator of the fact. They will refer to 'the voice', 'the voce', or, even more tellingly, 'the instrument': it is spoken of as an Other. With students of this viewpoint, there is often a lot of gung-ho associated with the processes of vocal training. Their voices are seen as tools, separate entities to be switched on or off, repaired, customised and honed. This school of thought tends to the mechanistic. Singing training is of a piece with working out at the gym. These students will want to see adequate evident recompense for their practice, much as a body-builder will presume pro-rata muscle-bulk

increase as a direct consequence of sufficient well-planned 'reps' (repetitions of exercise). It will annoy these students that singers develop many muscles that cannot be visually monitored for signs of growth. They will frequently express the need to quantify their progress.

A teacher guiding the training of these students will have few problems with making critical observations of their voices. Since they see their voice as virtually another entity, correction rarely troubles them; they will often tell the teacher where they perceive their problems to be, and sometimes even offer strategies for their own improvement. A singers with this 'voice as tool' viewpoint would seem to be a readily teachable sort of student, glad to hear criticism and seemingly ready to act on any of the teacher's observations. The darker side of their work is the great difficulty for them to attach genuine emotional significance to text in sung performance. These are the students for whom 'acting acting' is the safest haven; AmDram musical theatre is overburdened with them.

If you give these students something to do, they love it. Specific activity is, after all, basic to their understanding of how they will improve 'the instrument'. Setting tasks that require a student to analyse lyric text, make specific artistic decisions based on this research, and incorporate these emotional choices within their performance, will channel the activity-oriented student into areas of open emotional connection and honesty within performance. If you can succeed in convincing the student that this work is imperative for any serious singer, and never permit them to offer an 'emotional wash' (e.g., 'I think this is a sad song, so I'll sing it all sadly') in place of a well-researched understanding of a lyric performed with sensitivity and artistic honesty, it is possible that the student and her/his voice may one day integrate.

The Voice as Mysterious Tenant

Whatever it is, it's got a will of its own.

A curious variant of the 'voice as tool' student, and polar opposite to those who hold the 'voice as anatomy' viewpoint, these students will speak of their voice as if it is an arcane entity semidetached from themselves. I have often thought that, to these students, their voices must feel rather like a mysterious foetus embedded within their flesh, the presence perceived but the entity unknowable. In fact, this view of voice is reminiscent of Kant's *ding an sich* — (the reality of the thing itself) — as essence beyond the knowledge of appearances.

These are the students who will shrug their shoulders in resignation when their voice fails to conform to a desired pattern. They'll say, 'See? I practise and practise, but it's got a will of its own. It doesn't listen to me. I'm trying my best, but I can't get through'. It is my opinion that the singer who individuates their self from their unbiddable, intangible voice will have done so for psychological reasons as a survival tactic.

I have often seen people who have been traumatised by punitive teaching regimes take shelter within this 'voice as mysterious tenant' viewpoint. When mistakes are feared, because students have been taught

to expect verbal abuse when they err, it makes sense that students survive by eventually separating themselves, and their earnest willingness to perform well, from their recalcitrant voices.

But it is not only students bullied by overzealous teachers who present with this kind of dichotomy. Children who have a fear of physical or psychological punishment and adult victims in abusive relationships may also take refuge in this point of view. In an ingrained need to please an authority figure (parent, schoolteacher, dominant partner, or the like), they have learned to deflect the blame so they attract the least amount of flak. However absurd it may seem to their singing teacher, the student with this view of their voice is really saying, 'Can you blame me if the voice won't do what I tell it to?' The trust of these students has been damaged in some way or other, and they find themselves in a distressing double bind. When their voices will not perform, they blame 'the voice' as an entity separate from themselves; when they succeed, I have observed that they are not prepared to accept praise. The voice merely did their bidding. In shifting blame, they also forgo the affirming pleasure of personal achievement.

A friend of mine is a fine acting teacher. One of the tenets of his teaching, restated frequently in his acting classes, is, 'In this room there are no mistakes, only discoveries'. A way of regrowing the trust of these students would be to seek to restructure the way they see failure. Music training can be a rigid discipline, especially in its beginning phases. When errors of rhythm or intonation are made, singing teachers are frequently quick off the mark to point them out. Some things can only be right or wrong. However, a student can learn to love making 'mistakes'. If errors are not feared but embraced consciously, the atavistic, unnamed apprehensions associated with 'making a mistake' will begin to be broken. In pedagogic terms, there is value in asking a student to sing an incorrect and then a correct version of the same phrase, while coaching the student to observe the physical feedback associated with the task. 'Which of the two felt easier?' 'Which one did you think was correct?' 'Why?' The old aphorism, 'Perfection is the enemy of excellence', applies here.

These are just some of the attitudes to their voices that singing teachers are likely to encounter. Failure to identify their existence may hamper the effective transfer of information and inspiration that all good teachers strive to achieve. When a teacher has the impression that they are 'not getting through' to a student, it may well be that the student's perception of their own voice is blocking their progress.

References

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