
The singer/actor's voice

The need for a shared pedagogy for the successful use of the singing/speaking voice in theatre voice training

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The speaking voice and the singing voice both originate from the same source: the larynx. Beyond that obvious fact there are quite different issues facing the singer/actor's use of the voice in terms of placement, pitch, registration, breath support, etc.

Most studies of the voice deal with the singing voice because it is easier to measure, as it deals with exact not approximate pitches. The professional speaking voice is another matter. Either it is ignored in studies or is treated as an extension of the singing voice. Singers have a difficult time getting out of the "head" voice after singing at high pitches for a long time and actors sometime have difficulty accessing the "head voice" to sing after a long emotional scene, and are often afraid of singing high pitches.

The body of the paper will be an exploration of these issues through interviews with voice professionals concerned with both the singing and the speaking voice, with the focus on developing a shared pedagogy that recognizes the demands of both the singing and the speaking voice.

INTRODUCTION

My interest in the subject of the singer/actor's voice came about gradually, beginning with my attempts as an actor to train my own singing voice, and then as a theatre voice teacher working with acting students whose only previous vocal training had been singing.

My earliest memories of singing were humiliating. Whether I was trying to sing hymns in church or a popular song from sheet music I purchased at our local music store, the problem was the same—I couldn't sing the high notes. I could carry a tune, and my voice could handle parts of the song well enough, but when I had to hit the top note, I was defeated. My mother, trying to be helpful, would then simply declare that I was no singer. Being a singer and hitting the high notes were synonymous. I longed to be in musicals, but had to look elsewhere in the theatre to shine.

When I began actor training in drama school, there was a great deal of emphasis on speech and voice production for the stage, but no training in singing.

When the folk music craze hit in the 1960s, I found that my voice actually worked pretty well with folk songs, and since I accompanied myself on the guitar, I could put on a *capo* and change the key to bring a song low enough for the high notes to be accessible. Still, it wasn't really singing in my book because, I couldn't hit the high notes as written in the sheet music I bought and I still couldn't sing in musicals.

Finally, in my twenties, I decided, with great trepidation, to take singing lessons. I explained to my teacher, V. William Reed, pointing at the keyboard of the piano, that I couldn't sing anything over C, above middle C, and even that was a stretch. He reacted very calmly to this, but made me stand where I couldn't see the piano keys. "What note is that?" I would demand suspiciously, as we vocalized higher and higher. Finally, it became clear to me that the upper register of my voice did exist and that I was entitled to use it. I also discovered a lot of other things, such as finding the right key for a song that suited my voice, not pushing the bottom of my voice into the top, and placement for the upper register. A few years later I even performed a major role in a musical much to my surprise at even being cast.

When I began teaching voice and speech to young theatre students, I found that at the beginning of each term I would listen to thin, reedy unsupported voices of students speaking in a high pitched head voice, trailing off into vocal fry at the end of the phrase. Many of these students said that they had been studying singing for several years. Why, I kept asking myself (and them), couldn't they apply the same principles of support and placement taught in singing to their speaking voices? They seemed to have a different problem with speaking from mine with singing, in that the high notes were *all* they had. There seemed to be a large gap in the voice, or rather there seemed to be two voices: one for singing and one for speaking, and they didn't go together. That's when I began to explore with them what they

were doing in their singing training that was different from speaking.

First, they told me that their singing teachers seldom, if ever, mentioned the speaking voice unless it was to caution them against using it in such a way that would adversely affect their singing voices. What they didn't tell them was how to do that.

Some of their singing teachers came exclusively from an operatic or choral music background; some from the musical theatre. The operatic teachers often tended to caution their students about involvement in musical theatre because some of the requirements, like "belting", might affect their operatic voice. The musical theatre teachers warned that the techniques of the world of opera would give them a "classical" sound that could undermine the natural tone they were trying to achieve in musical theatre singing training. While the musical theatre voice teachers were generally more understanding of the need for good vocal technique for the speaking voice, because of the demand for it in musicals, they didn't know how to help the students achieve it. Some students were told by their singing teachers to "save" their singing voices from the effects of vocal fry by only using the head voice in speaking, which produced thin reedy head tones, and some were even told to limit their speaking altogether to "save" the singing voice.

I decided to approach the problem by interviewing a series of professionals in both areas: musical theatre directors, opera directors, opera singers, singing teachers for both opera and musicals, as well as theatre directors and theatre voice teachers, to see if we couldn't find some areas of common ground or at least to discover what divides us. My goal was to find a common pedagogy for both the singing and the speaking voice that could be used by both teachers of the singing and the speaking voice. My contacts were:

1. Michael Erman—Resident Director of Opera, Coordinator of Opera Program, School of Music, Northwestern University;
2. Dominic Missimi—Musical Theatre Director, Head of Musical Theatre Program, Northwestern University;
3. V. William Reed—New York Singing Teacher who teaches both operatic and musical theatre singers;
4. Sunny Joy Langton—Opera Singer, Voice Teacher, School of Music, Northwestern University;
5. Kurt R. Hansen—Opera Singer, Voice Teacher, School of Music, Northwestern University;
6. George Hall—Director, Actor, Teacher Royal Academy of Music, Former Head of Acting, Central School of Speech and Drama in London from 1964–1987;
7. John Jones—Director, Director London Centre for Theatre Studies, formerly Acting Coach Central School of Speech and Drama;
8. Patsy Rodenburg—Head of Voice Department, The Royal National Theatre, and Guildhall School of Speech and Drama. (I am actually quoting from Patsy's book *The Actor Speaks* (1) because I was unable to meet with her personally this summer.)

INTERVIEWS

1) *Michael Erman (Opera Director, Head of Opera Division Department of Theatre and the School of Music, Northwestern University)*

Mr. Erman said that he hadn't had much experience in working with the singing/acting voice. In general, his experience with singers is that when they have come to opera from only church music and choral singing, they have a more difficult time with the speaking roles than singers who have done musicals and plays.

2) *Dominic Missimi (Musical Theatre Director, Head of Musical Theatre Program, Northwestern University)*

Singers who have been trained only to manufacture beautiful sound often aren't prepared to speak words. They have trouble moving from the manufactured sound of singing into the more natural sound of speaking. Singers who have learned to make powerful choices in singing often have trouble keeping the energy up when they move into speaking. They have timid "wallflower" speaking voices. Also, with some actor/singers one has to break them of the idea that words must be declaimed. There is a problem especially with women singer/actors such as a mezzo soprano whose speaking voice is reedy and bird like and doesn't fit the character. In musical theatre, women who are beltters sometimes have nodes on their vocal cords which gives a raspy quality to the speaking voice.

3) *V. William Reed—New York singing teacher, private practice*

Singing training focuses on producing a beautiful singing voice, with no attention paid to the speaking voice. Singing teachers in the USA are not trained to help with the speaking voice. Training also doesn't take into consideration a lot of the different voice qualities needed for different performance situations. It is as if students only studied ballet but were expected to be able to do tap and jazz as well. Voice training needs to be more flexible. There are a number of ways to speak well professionally depending on the requirements of the situation. With the exception of Jo Estill, there are no good belt teachers, especially within the university training system. Realities of the real world are at odds with most current training.

4) *Sunny Joy Langton—Opera singer, voice teacher, School of Music, Northwestern University*

There is seldom training of the speaking voice when training the singing voice. Singers are often afraid of their speaking voice and their voices becomes high pitched on stage because of trying to preserve the placement. I believe that placement for singing and speaking is the same: the sinus cavities and hard palate. Pitch moves around in terms of resonance and finds it's level but the focal point remains the same. Concentrate by lifting on the opening between soft palate and hard palate combined with the expansion of the ribs. Legato singing is the same as connected speech.

When singing emotional pieces it's difficult to sing and cry—with music it's obvious that you have to exert some

control over the emotions or you couldn't sing the notes, but with spoken text you aren't always sure.

There needs to be a balance on awareness of different kinds of forms. I just completed a one-act opera by William Ferris with a text by Dorothy Parker—the singing moved into speaking and back again. There is need for an integrated approach to professional voice for actor/singer that is team taught.

5) *Kurt R. Hansen—singing teacher, School of Music, Northwestern University*

Opera voice teachers are often condescending towards musical theatre. How do you balance the dictates of style in a musical like *Rent* using your voice correctly.

Generally the biggest problem with the speaking voice for singers is that the injury ratio rates are unequally divided between men and women. In both sexes, speaking voice is often forced too low and involves using the muscles in the neck for support and vocal fry.

6) *George Hall—director, actor, teacher Royal Academy Of Music, former Head of Acting, Central School of Speech and Drama in London from 1964–1987*

I think everything is particular cases. You can stand in front of one person and say I wish they would sing the way they speak, while with others you wish they would speak the way they sing. A good singing actor like Angela Lansbury: would you say she sings differently than she speaks? Or Elaine Stritch, does she speak differently than she sings? Teresa Stratas in *Rags*?

It also depends hugely on whether it's opera, operetta or musicals. Sir John Giegud says that style is knowing the kind of play you're in.

Stephen Sondheim says that there are a lot of people who can act and sing but can't do both at the same time. Finally, I don't think you can say anything that is not contradictory. Everyone wants to reduce training of voice to a scientific statement which isn't possible. There are no rules.

7) *John Jones Director—Teacher London Centre for Theatre Studies*

Some speeches in Shakespeare are so heightened that they are almost like singing. Valeries Masterson says that in the transition between song to ordinary domestic speech, the speech must be heightened.

Some singers who have spent their whole career in D'Oyly Carte performing Gilbert and Sullivan still can't speak well.

8) *Patsy Rodenburg—Head of Voice Department, The Royal National Theatre, and Guildhall School of Speech and Drama*

Many singers are frightened of speaking. Many speakers are frightened of singing. The two voices rarely meet and overlap with ease. There is often a grinding of vocal gears as a singer moves into speaking, or a speaker into singing. Energy ceases to flow naturally and the voice can make alarming jumps in terms of placing and pitch. Singers will often push too hard and be too loud, or go to the other end of the spectrum and not support their spoken

voice. Speakers can freeze as they move towards singing, losing all flexibility in their voices and not knowing how their singing voices will come out. I realize that singing is, on one level, a very technically complex activity. Yet it is more natural than speaking. It has a fluency and a free flow that should be fun and more liberating than speaking text. This free flow has been stifled by very rigid notions of note, placing the voice, timing and the type of voice you have. The potentially joyous side of singing has been corseted with judgemental fears. It will always help if you need the words of both the song and the text. Singing is a notch up from speaking in terms of emotional expression (Rodenburg 137).

CONCLUSION

Training institutions should implement joint training of both the speaking and the singing voice, with full communication between teachers of singing and speaking. Both teachers, students and audiences will benefit.

REFERENCES

1. Rodenburg P. *The actor speaks*. London: Methuen, 1997.

SAMMANFATTNING

Sång- respektive talrösten

Författaren som är röstlärare vid Northwestern University's teaterskola söker en gemensam röstpedagogik för sång-, respektive talrösten.

YHTEENVETO

Laulajan ja näyttelijän ääni

Laulu- ja puheääni kumpuavat samasta lähteestä—kurkunpäästä. Tämän ilmeisen tosiseikan ohella on monia erottavia alueita, kuten esimerkiksi sijoittaminen, sävelkorkeus, rekisteri, hengitystuki jne. Yleensä äänitutkimuksissa on tutkittu laulajia, koska tällöin sävelkorkeus voidaan vakioida. Puheääni on kuitenkin eri asia: sitä ei ole joko tutkittu tai sen on katsottu edustavan lauluäänen yhtä ulottuvuutta. Laulajilla on usein vaikeuksia tuottaa rinta-sointista puheääntä laulettuaan "päärekisterissä". Toisaalta näyttelijöillä on usein vaikeuksia korkeiden sävelten laulamisessa tunnevoimaisten puhekohtausten jälkeen. Tässä kirjoituksissa valotetaan näitä ongelmia laulu- ja puhekouluuttajien haastattelujen perusteella. Tavoitteena on etsiä pedagogisia näkökulmia, jotka yhdistäisivät laulu- ja puheäänen vaatimukset.

Evolutionary aspects as holistic tools in vocal pedagogy and therapy

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After rediscovering the Laryngeal Double Valve Function, the author's work with individuals and groups based on the Feldenkrais-Method has convinced him that the evolution of man will give us further efficient tools for voice pedagogy and therapy.

Like all movement, vocal performance is dependent on a) completeness of proprioceptive representation in the CNS (somatic self image) and, b) availability of evolutionary earlier neural patterns of movement. Five examples will be discussed: 1) grasping with hands and feet—onset of voice; 2) reptilian crawling—laryngeal closure; 3) sucking—singing; 4) planes of orientation—vowels; 5) hearing—voice sound.

Key words: evolution, exercise, Feldenkrais, movement, proprioception, self-awareness, voice.

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INTRODUCTION

The effectiveness of vocal pedagogy and therapy depends on the underlying model of human functioning. New concepts of biology define our organism as an autopoietic system and its CNS as a closed system, that provides survival for the organism in interaction with its environ-

ment (Maturana, Varela, (12)). We may call this interaction more simply: *learning in one's self-interest*. Therefore, it is obvious that the currently often used cartesian and behaviouristic concepts of research and development of human skills are unsuitable and unrealistic, because they do not consider the characteristics of a living system (2, 13, 18).