

Singing and the Therapeutic Voice Lesson

My interest is not so much creativity in counseling as counseling within a creative activity. I am currently a student working toward my Masters in Professional and Rehabilitative Counseling, and I am also a long-time professional singer and voice teacher, trained in a high-level understanding of classical vocal technique and performance. Through my own personal healing journey, and through witnessing that of my students over the last 15 years and more, I have seen how our lives can change through the process of learning to sing. My main reason for pursuing a counseling qualification is to gain more therapeutic skills so I can help those students who continue to say to me: "I've come for my therapy session!" I call what I now do, therapeutic voice lessons. This is to acknowledge my holistic and wellness-oriented approach to our work, recognizing that together, we create a safe space where all parts of the student are welcome, and that our work is not restricted to purely skill-based vocal production.

There is a connection between vocal development and inner personal growth. 'Inner' or psychological voice reflects and is reflected by 'outer' or instrumental voice. When I work on vocal technique, I find that emotional blockages get in the way of improved singing function. If I can find emotional release, in the process I also release my voice. Marilyn McCarthy says: "...in revealing

the self, the voice is uncovered." (In Chapman, 2006) Conversely, problems in my singing are mirrored in my emotional moods and stability, and if I am singing well, I am always in a buoyant mood. As Kristen Linklater (2006) comments, "To free the voice is to free the person." There are times as a teacher when I can 'warm up' a student's voice more effectively by a short, focused meditation than by 20 minutes or more of athletic

vocal exercises. Understanding whether it will be more productive to address an inner or an outer voice problem is a part of my expertise as a voice teacher. That is where the counseling within creativity enters the picture. It is a prerequisite to therapeutic voice lessons that the teacher be able to understand, at least in some measure, how inner and outer voice connect, and to be capable of listening to both. A keen ear can discern aspects of a person's life story from details such as the comfort with which the student inhabits his or her

body, how he or she uses vocal colors and tonal quality, and connects to lyrics, dynamics and rhythm. The extent of available vocal range, use of breath and resonance, focal ability, balance, positive and negative self-talk, expressivity, inflection and intensity are also all relevant and revealing. Diane Austin (2008), a pioneer in the field of Vocal Psychotherapy, remarks: "Listening is fundamental and unique to our work. We are trained to listen. We depend upon our abilities to listen to music and words with our whole selves..."

"Singing is empowering. It allows us to feel the life force flowing through our bodies producing strong, prolonged tones. Singing can bring us into the present moment where everything is new and many things are possible, where we can create something surprising, something beautiful, something filled with raw feeling, something authentic. Finding one's voice is finding one's self."

(Diane Austin, in Baker and Uhlig, 2011. p.17)

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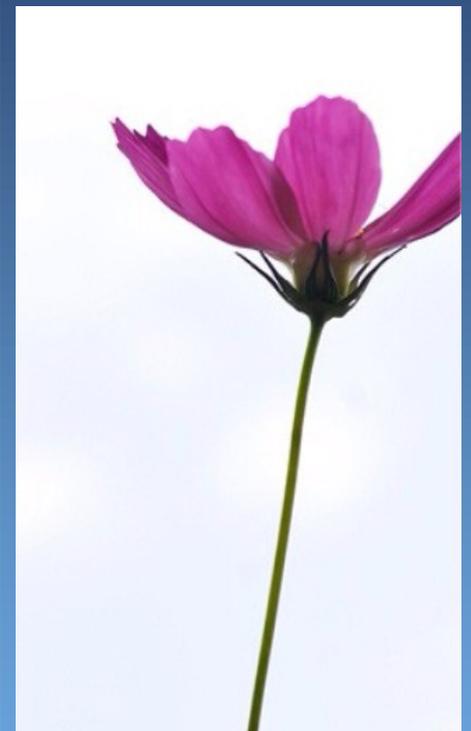
Singing cont.

Singing is an integration of cognitive, emotional, physical and vocal elements. Janice Chapman is an influential voice for holistic work within the classical vocal tradition. She says, "...the act of singing involves the whole person (i.e. body, mind, spirit, emotion and voice)." I, too, have found that the art of learning to sing involves finding a focused balance of elements within this whole, and practicing a kind of mindfulness in order to achieve this. Singing connects mind and body through the medium of the breath. It embraces understanding essential paradoxes in the same way as we think about coping with polarities or black and white thinking in everyday life issues. I have often thought that much about singing relates to learning to live with gray. It is about balance between extremes. Self-awareness usually takes place cognitively at first, but it is the body's understanding that is more important. This happens experientially: visually, aurally and kines-thetically. The more a student achieves this, the closer he or she gets to finding his or her own voice and authenticity "Being an inner instrument of the body, the voice is at a unique and powerful vantage point for working with the self from within." (Bruscia, 1987, p.358) Art is about communication and so we each need to have a clear voice in order to connect in this way. For singing, we are talking about clarity in both the inner and outer voices.

So much that happens in counseling parallels what is also being sought in the process of learning to sing, namely, greater intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. We are all seeking balance in the face of conflicting ideas and beliefs, internal and external. Many of us are looking to be more grounded in our bodies and are struggling to find personal identity and a 'voice'. Singing is an empowering way to follow Jung's path of individuation, to search for personal truth, and to reach for wholeness. It can be fulfilling, integrative and a source of community with others. I believe that it has a part to play in our life journeys, having the potential to be a means of access to true self and thus to be immensely therapeutic. And singing is not just for a special, talented few. It is the birthright of us all. We are all walking musical instruments. "It is the instrument we are born with, the body's own voice." (Austin, 2008, p.19) Our voice is our interface with the world as Austin says, "...whether we are sighing, groaning, yawning, laughing, crying, shouting, speaking or singing." (2008, p.23) Regardless of talent, we all have the capacity to benefit from the process.

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**Spring is nature's
way of saying,
"Let's party!"
~Robin Williams**



**Science has never
drummed up quite
as effective a
tranquilizing agent
as a sunny
spring day.**

~W. Earl Hall

Singing, cont.

Historically, the teacher/student relationship in a singing lesson was hierarchical, rooted in old ideas of master and apprentice. In a holistic approach to voice lessons, this has changed. The relationship becomes collaborative and supportive. In my studio, I seek to offer Rogerian conditions of warmth, genuineness, congruence, accurate empathy and unconditional positive regard. These core conditions for growth and healing can sometimes be perceived as difficult to maintain in the context of skill training where there is some element of judgment, but it is possible to remain authentic, appropriately critical yet positive. Perhaps the element of challenge is even a therapeutic catalyst, inviting the student to look more deeply within? The relationship itself is central to creating a safe and trusting environment where a singer feels sufficiently secure to experiment and play - and where it is not only acceptable to be 'good enough' without being perfect, but desirable! This last is so important, as 'good enough' almost always ends up being better than any strived-for - but unattainable - perfection.

There is such joy and essential physicality in feeling renewed oxygen replenishing and energizing the system, in experiencing the sensation of one's own resonance vibrating throughout the body at a cellular level. Reaching for the safety of an old, favorite song or simply the pattern of a vocal exercise can have a calming and centering effect in the context of depression, anxiety or trauma. It can place you in greater connection with your body and yourself. Learning to sing in a therapeutic environment can bridge the worlds of skill training and therapy, providing a window of possibilities for creativity and personal growth. Through this process, we increase awareness of self and others, learn to process change, develop resilience and heal wounds.

References

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Adèle Paxton, LL.B (Hons), Dip.L.P., PPRNCM qualified first as a lawyer in Scotland before becoming a professional concert and opera singer. She has won many awards including the Royal Overseas League International Gold Medal and has performed extensively in Europe, in the USA and Brazil. She teaches voice on faculty at Central Connecticut State University where she is also currently completing a Masters in Professional and Rehabilitation Counseling. She hopes to continue to integrate her classical vocal understanding with deeper therapeutic knowledge for the purposes of healing and wholeness.