

Vocal Improvisation - A Pathway to deeper understanding of the self

Nicola Oddy B.Mus. M.A. MTA

Vocal Improvisation is an element of music therapy that tends to slide under the carpet. Although most of us use the voice in our sessions, and many of us in fact improvise with our voices, it is often not included in training programs as an important element of the field. We study improvisation on keyboard, and with other primary instruments. Improvisation with the voice is less regarded as vital or necessary. How many of you for example have learned how to play modes and idioms on the piano? And how many have studied modes and idioms using the voice?

Today we are going to spend the majority of our time with experiences. There is however, a little to be said as well.

Training the voice is an act of commitment that has been paralleled to that of the body builder training his body (Joyce, 1999). While all people work and lift and move objects, the body builder trains his muscles to be larger than life and to be better than the rest. While all people are singers, the person who trains vigorously and learns to project into large spaces and to maintain amazing stamina is a genre of singer apart from the rest. This genre could include both professional and non-professional singers just as a person who trains the body to be larger than life can do so for personal or professional reasons. The important factor here is an ability which is out of the ordinary. Technique has to be impeccable, and understanding of the acoustic of the voice has to be intact. Singers who are in training to develop and become that special voice need technical expertise, and the academic literature about the voice reflects this focus. Seldom do the writings address the singer's perception of spiritual and emotional qualities of singing with any depth, and often the listener's perception is addressed as opposed to the singer's perception (Andreas, 1975; Reid, 1965; Vennard, 1967).

There are some instances where writers enter the realm of vocal self perception, albeit briefly. Esther Salaman is a singer and teacher of singing. Her book (Salaman, 1989), while covering many technical elements of singing, does not negate the intangible. "I believe the wish to sing is intimately bound up with the desire we all have to know and express ourselves" (p. 64). She also combines physical and intangible elements (spirit and emotion) so that it is clear that one affects the other. "The wish to sing and open up one's personality means physically opening up the back of the throat; literally the gateway to freedom and expression" (p.63). Cornelius Reid writes books about the technical elements of singing. He tends toward the traditional view of singing, meaning that most of what he prescribes is based on the need to remove vocal imperfections (Reid, 1979, p. 85). He then offers an alternate view which he touches on very briefly.

Restricted to purely physical dimensions there are but two factors to be considered, registration and resonance. But neither of these operates in a vacuum and must be considered part of the total person, with allowance made for judgments and attitudes toward creative goals aesthetic concepts and ideals, physical potential, and emotional blockages. It is the latter which may now be seen to hamper progress so severely.(p.14)

Many others who have written books about technique add a small tribute to the spiritual or emotional. "Singing is actually the transmutation of energy into tone" (Jones, 1947, p.3). "The human voice is the only musical instrument with a heart, mind and a soul" (Cooke, 1952, p. 15). "The voice is the expression of the whole physical body, and intellect and the spirit. If the body, the mind or the soul is ill, the voice is affected instantly" (Lehmann, 1945, p.54). These very fine and important points are often touched upon in the introduction or conclusion as an embellishment (Burgin, 1973; Schiotz, 1953; Shakespeare, 1924), and are rarely elaborated upon.

The Use of Voice in Therapy

Music therapy is a medium that includes the use of any kind of musical instrument, including the voice. Why separate the voice from the rest, and examine it or differentiate it from the other instruments that are used? The voice is different because our body is the instrument. It is personal, and thus sounding often can be a reflection of the personality, or something that is happening emotionally (Austin, 2001; Joyce Moon, 1999; McClure, 1998; Nichols-Rothe, 1995; Patteson, 1998). When playing the piano, for example, the way a pianist plays can be judged. The instrument on which the pianist plays can be assessed also, but then it is not the essence of the musician that is being judged, it is someone else's craftsmanship, or someone else's tuning ability. For the singer, all of the judgement rests with him or her. "Fear of judgement about the way one sounds can inhibit any attempt to sing even when there is a strong desire to do so" (Austin, 1993, p. 316). In many cases, it is judgement that has been received from times long ago that has become ingrained and introjected.¹ The singer may not sing because of a fear that is not understood or even recognized. The fear may be a reflection of something impressed upon the individual by another who won't sing, or an internal fear based on being silenced as a child (Joyce Moon, 1999; O'Loughlin, 1995). "When he has learned to survive by living in silence and denying his emotional truth, finding his voice

¹ Introjection is a Gestalt therapy term that refers to the 'swallowing whole' of impressions, judgements, or anything else that has been impressed upon the individual by another, in the family, school, or society. The thing that is significant about an introject, is that the person may not be aware that they are not in confluence with the issue. (Perls, Hefferline, Goodman, 1951)

requires courage” (Austin, 1993, p. 316). The inability to open up the voice physically and mentally because of the fear of singing is referred to as “imprisonment” by Barbareaux-Parry (1941). I ask each of you to reflect upon your own sense of judgement of your own voice, of other voices, and how you feel about the judgement you receive from others.

The person who considers himself or herself to be a non-singer may be used to thinking of the voice as an instrument to be played only with skill. In this case, they will not be heard singing any more than they would be heard playing a song on the violin without being taught. This is the notion that needs to be overcome. Singing is as natural and as innate as laughter. The voice is an instrument apart from the rest. We are not born with a violin in our hands or a piano to play. We *are* born with a voice with which to sing.

Use of the voice in therapy is touched on from several different angles by therapists who focus on the voice. Diane Austin (1993, 1996, 1998, 2001) approaches voice therapy from the Jungian perspective that the voice contains information from the deep past that is shared by all human beings. These archetypal images come forth as subconscious messengers to anyone who is willing to receive them (Austin 1993). This Jungian approach is of great interest to a music therapist who taps into the symbolism of the improvisations. Jung’s notions of the personal and collective unconscious, and the use of symbolism, are very relevant to voice work (McClure, 1998; Sokolov 1987).

As well as the Jungian approach, Austin (1993) also looks to object relations (Winnicott, 1971) and writes about the use of voice to repair early mother-child ruptures.

There is also a strong movement toward the use of voice in body awareness work (Linklater, 1976; McClure, 1998; Newham, 1998; Sokolov, 1987). Wilhelm Reich’s views on the nature of body energy, character armours and the storage of feelings in the body are also relevant (Sharaf, 1983; Sokolov, 1987). Paul Newham (1998) has created an entire genre, which he titles ‘Therapeutic Voicework.’ This genre is wholly based on the concept of the link between voice and body.

Silvia Nakkach is a music therapist who has created a school of voice, which she titles ‘Vox Mundi.’ She uses a multi-modal approach, including media such as chant, toning, sound poetry, song writing, voice meditation, vocal techniques from contemporary music, and use of vocal music from around the world. Her premise for her school is that “expressing the inherent musicality of the voice activates healing. Singing is a tool to transform consciousness and emotional and physical dysfunction” (Nakkach, 1999, p.1). She believes that it is important to sing and sing some more. “The key is to cultivate familiarity with the practice of singing - as often as possible” (pg.1).

A surprising source of great interest in use of the voice as therapy was found in the experiential education literature. There appears to be a new rise in the work of music educators toward helping students experience the voice in a positive and growing light

(Joyce Moon, 1999; Patteson, 1999; Smithrim, 1998, 1999). After hearing so many stories of oppression and lack of compassion by teachers in the past, it was with great delight that this was noted. Teachers of singing are now aware that their students who have emotional and spiritual issues are encountering solutions in the music studio. One educator takes singing outside of the studio, and uses singing in wilderness experiences with abused women. She writes:

At the individual level, singing is making music with the body as instrument. As such, it is a form of “body work” that has the potential to do what all therapeutic body work does. It can release tension, loosen blockages of cellular energy, and access emotion, and memories that may be locked in various location in the body.(Joyce Moon, 1999, p. 247)

As a teacher, she has arrived at a similar place in her work as have music therapists Diane Austin, Lisa Sokolov, and psychologists Wendy McClure and Paul Newham. People in these three professions approach the voice from completely different perspectives. People from different fields recognize the voice as an important element of the psyche. This recognition is a statement of the significance of the relationship between voice and psyche.²

The Spiritual Nature of Singing and Sounding

There is a wide range of belief systems in music therapy, from cognitive and behavioural approaches to very spiritual approaches. My personal belief system is based in a more spiritual and psychological framework. This is the realm that I find most intriguing in music therapy sessions. In my own work, the degree of spirituality in a session is what determines the degree of success (Oddy 1999). With all of the musical expertise in the world, and with the most beautiful space to work in, if the interaction does not include an emotional or spiritual component, it is a session without substance. This is the essence that provides the link to people who are non-verbal, with little apparent cognizance. It is also the link to deep emotional places in psychoanalytical work (Austin 1993, 1996, 1998, 2001; Lehtonen 1994). This is the freedom and invitation to express oneself fully in the company of the other. It is the quality of connection

² The realization that people from varying fields share the same view led me to think that music therapists are ready to enter dialogue and comparisons with other professionals who are experiencing similar conclusions from different perspectives. In this way we can discover our ‘similarities and differences’ (Kenny, personal conversation, 2001). Music therapists have drawn on other psychological and behavioural models over the years in order to explain themselves. Now that music therapy has begun to establish its autonomy, it can include itself in the broader community. This way, the other professions can recognize *our* literature and accomplishments. In the experiential education literature there was not one music therapy reference. This needs to change

between two people. It is not linked to religious practise, or any belief system at all. It is a resonance between two human beings (McMaster 1996).

In the dictionary, the word 'spirit' is defined as coming from the Latin word spiritus, which means breath (Guralnik,1968). This definition is particularly 'inspiring,' because the voice is all breath, all spirit. Lisa Sokolov encapsulates this notion well.

Breath is the life force that feeds the spiritual fire of the musical self.
Taking in breath is drawing closer from the collective whole and outside,
and channelling it into the inner self. To breathe in is to inspire, bring in,
open and receive. It is a respiring from without. (Sokolov, 1987, p.357)

Austin writes that "Singing offers a way for the disembodied spirit to incarnate because the way home can be pleasurable and the painful feelings can be put into an aesthetically pleasing form" (Austin, 2001, p. 5). Her work with disassociation and archetypes is a very spiritual process (personal experience, 2000).

Wendy McClure articulates the concept of taking a step beyond the self through singing. "I propose that a profound resource for the phenomenon of healing through singing and sounding is the universal unconscious. Vocal expression linked to the universal unconscious provides support for self to sound through" (McClure, 1998, p. 118). She works with 'voicing the world soul' in wilderness experiences. This sounds like a powerful way to experience the intangible elements of the voice.

Literature about the voice as spiritual is often focused on three other areas, which exist outside of and in confluence with music therapy. Chant is a repetitive singing of a phrase, which produces an altered state. In this state, spiritual and emotional learning takes place (Gass, 1999). Toning is a continued held sound which the singer experiences as a resonance in different parts of the body (Beaulieu, 1987;Gardner-Gordon, 1993; Keyes, 1973; Rudhyar,1982). The third is the singing that takes place as a means for spiritual connection engaged in by most religious practices in the world (Gass,1999;Nakkach, 1999).

In the experiential education literature an example of openness to spiritual experience emerging through the voice is as follows:

The process of 'giving voice' is sacred work and singing allows us to express ourselves as spiritual beings It connects us to our humanity and to our sacredness; it grounds us and centres us in our power. Singing can be a sublime experience, eliciting joy, awe, wonder, and reverence, even in the midst of despair and sadness. It moves and transforms energy. (Joyce Moon, 1999, p. 249)

Through vocal improvisation work with a therapist, the client can see into parts of her or his self that were hidden away until that point. When the client is ready and willing to go to a deeper level of awareness the voice is there as a fundamental tool for accessing that

awareness. We need only keep an open attitude, cast away self judgement and fear of judgement, and sing...

During the body of this workshop, we are going to try an array of vocal improvisation experiences. Chances are that much of what is written here will not be relayed during this presentation, as it is of primary importance to experience the work. Experiences will be presented in group format, and participants will be asked to reflect upon possibilities for one on one work with the voice.

Resources

Andreas, E. (1975). *The Voice of singing*. New York: Carl Fischer

Austin, D. (1993). When the Psyche Sings. In K. Bruscia (Ed.), *The Dynamics of music psychotherapy*. Gilsum: Barcelona Publishers.

Austin, D (1996). The role of improvised music in psychodynamic music therapy with adults. *Music therapy journal* Vol. 14, No.1, 29-43.

Austin, D. (1998). Vocal improvisation in analytically oriented music therapy with adults. In T. Wigram and J. De Backer (Eds.), *Clinical applications of music therapy in psychiatry*. UK: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Austin, D (2001). In search of the self: The use of vocal holding techniques with adults traumatized as children. *Perspectives* Spring 2001.

Cooke, J. F. (1952). The golden chalices of song. *Etude*, September 1952, p 15.

Barboreux-Parry, M.(1941). *Vocal resonance: Its source and command*. Mass.: Christopher Publishing House.

Gardner-Gordon, J. (1993). *The Healing voice: Traditional and contemporary toning, chanting and singing*. C.A.: The Crossing Press.

Gass, R. (1999). *Chanting*. New York: Broadway Books.

Guralnik, D.B. (Ed.) (1968). *Webster's new world dictionary*. Toronto: Popular Library.

Hirschorn, L. (1982). 'Circle Chant' on *Routes and wings*. Redwood: Oyster Albums

Joyce Moon, V. M.(1999). Singing a spider woman's song . In J. Turner and C. Rose (Eds.), *Spider woman: A Tapestry of creativity and healing*. Winnipeg: J. Gordon Shillingford Publishing Inc.

Kenny, C. B. (Ed.). (1995). *Listening, playing, creating: Essays on the power of sound*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.

- Keyes, L.E. (1973). *Toning, the creative power of the voice*. Santa Monica: De Vorss.
- Lehtonen, K. (1994). Is music an archaic form of thinking?. *Nordic journal of music therapy*, vol.3 (1), pp.3-12.
- McLure, W.M. (1998). *A Cross Cultural Interdisciplinary Study of the Healing Power of Singing*. Unpublished thesis, Pacifica Graduate Institute.
- McMaster, N. (1995). Listening: A sacred act. In C.B. Kenny (Ed.), *Listening, playing, creating: Essays on the power of sound* (pp. 71-75). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- McMaster, N. (1996). *Music therapy: A Partnership of listening; using sound and silence to restore and expand a resonance of being*. Unpublished thesis, New York University.
- Nakkach, S. (1999). 'Vox Mundi'. Pamphlet describing Vox Mundi Project programs. voxmundi@jps.net
- Newham, P.(1998a). *The Singing cure: Liberating self expression through voice movement therapy*. Boulder: Sounds True.
- Newham, P. (1998b). *Therapeutic voice work : The Principles and practice for the use of singing as a therapy*. U.K.: Jessica Kingsley publishers.
- Newham, P. (1992). Jung and Alfred Wolfsohn: analytical psychology and the singing voice. *Journal of analytical psychology*, 37, pp. 323-336.
- Nichols-Rothe. (1995). Singing Practices and States of Consciousness. In C.B. Kenny (Ed.), *Listening, playing, creating: Essays on the power of sound* (pp. 15-18). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Oddy, N. (1998). Thom. *Kaleidoscope*, 53 Canadian Music Therapy Trust Fund: Toronto.
- Oddy, N. (1999). Tuning into the music spirit - An investigation into the role of the spirit, in music therapy relationships. *Proceedings of the twenty -sixth annual conference of the Canadian association for music therapy*. Waterloo: CAMT
- Oddy, N. (2001). Convergences: Possibilities for Therapeutic Intervention in a Large Scale Community Performance- A Systems Perspective. *Canadian journal of music therapy*. Vol. 8, No.1 Spring 2001 (has been reviewed and accepted for publication).
- Patteson, A. (1999). *Singing a woman's life: How singing lessons transformed the lives of nine women*. Unpublished thesis, Queens University.

- Reid, C. (1975). *Voice: Psyche and soma*. New York: Joseph Patelson Music House.
- Salaman, E. (1989). *Unlocking your voice: Freedom to sing*. London: Gollancz Publishing.
- Sharaf, M. (1983). *Fury on earth*. St. Martins Press: Marek, New York.
- Smithrim, K. (1998). Still singing for our lives: Singing in the everyday lives of women through this century. In B. Roberts (Ed). *Sharing the voices: The phenomenon of singing*. (pp.217-232). St. John's Newfoundland: Memorial University Press.
- Smithrim, K. (1999). Gonna sing when the Spirit says sing: The role of singing in women's spiritual lives. Paper presented at *Sharing the Voices, the phenomenon of singing*. St. John's, Newfoundland, July 2-5, 1999.
- Sokolov, L. (1987). Vocal Improvisation Therapy. In K. Bruscia (Ed.). *Improvisational models of music therapy*. (pp. 353-359). Illinois: Barcelona Publishers.
- Winnicott, D.W. (1971). *Playing and reality*. London: Tavistock Publications, Ltd.
- Vennard, W. (1967). *Singing: The mechanism and the technic*. New York: Carl Fischer.

Further Readings

- Amir, D (1996). Experiencing music therapy: Meaningful moments in the music therapy process. In M. Langenberg, K. Aigen, J. Frommer (Eds.), *Qualitative Music Therapy Research* (pp. 109-130). Gilsum: Barcelona Publishers.
- Boone, D. and McFarlane, S. (1988). *The Voice and voice therapy*. New Jersey: Simon and Schuster.
- Braddock, G. (1995). *Body voices: Using the power of breath, sound and movement to heal and create new boundaries*. Berkeley: Page Mill Press.
- Bunch, M. (1993). *Dynamics of the singing voice*. New York: Springer -Verlag Wien.
- Goldberg, F. (1995). The unbidden song. In C.B. Kenny (Ed.), *Listening, playing, creating: Essays on the power of sound* (pp. 15-18). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Gunther, M. (1990). The human voice: on Alfred Wolfsohn. *Spring: A Journal of archetype and culture*, 50

- Houseman, B. (1994). Voice and the release and exploration of emotion. *Dramatherapy*, 16, 2 and 3.
- Hunter, B.C. (1999). Singing as a therapeutic agent, in *The Etude, 1891-1949. Journal of music therapy*, XXXVI (2), 125-143
- Jones, W. (1947). Leaves from my notebook. *The NATS bulletin*, 3 (June-July), p 3.
- Kenny, C. B. (1982). *The Mythic artery*. California: Ridgeview Publishing Company.
- Kenny, C. B. (1989). *The field of play: A Guide for the theory and practice of music therapy*. California: Ridgeview Publishing Company.
- Lehmann, L. (1945). *More than singing*. New York: Boosey and Hawkes.
- Linklater, K. (1976). *Freeing the natural voice*. New York: Drama Book.
- Mohan, H. (1997). *The Connection between our spirituality and our work: Interviews with Music Therapists*. Unpublished thesis, Open University.
- Seeger, P. (Ed.) (1992). *Rise up singing*. Bethlehem, PA: Sing Out Corp.
- Summers, S.(1999). *A Tapestry of Voices: Community Building with a Geriatric Choir Reflected in a Music Therapy Model of Practise*. Unpublished thesis, Open University.