Singing Performance: An Inclusive Roundtable Dialogue to Share Insights on the Thinking Which Informs our Teaching and Performance

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We Have Nothing to Lose But our Muddle!

There is no point in philosophy unless it helps us to live our lives. It is not the exclusive preserve of academic philosophers, but a matter of vital concern to us all. Life is difficult and full of things that we have to deal with, but don't understand, or only partly understand. The main, and possibly the only reason for philosophy is to help us negotiate this maze with peace and self-respect, so that we can maximise our contribution to the world in which we live, and the communities of which we are part.

This enterprise is both complex, because each of us is different from everyone else and there is a seemingly infinite number of interactions possible between all the factors that affect our lives, and it is also gloriously simple. It is simple because we have evolved to survive and be effective and if we learn to work with this it is almost all that we have to do. Of course, making clear what is simple is often more difficult and, sometimes, more controversial than complex arguments. Clarity makes it more possible for people to know where they stand.

We see this in operation in singing lessons all the time. The student knows their music and their body is poised to sing it, but there are so many things that we all add in – formality of approach which gets in the way of the music speaking directly, extra effort in some part of the throat, for example, which stops the notes flowing as they could and extra tension in the lower back which a person erroneously thinks they need in order to stay upright. And each of these things is, fundamentally, complicating something which is actually very simple – using the flow of breath over the vocal chords to produce pitched sound.

The Relation of the Alexander Technique to a Philosophical Approach to Singing

But someone who can observe accurately what these self-imposed complications are can help the student can become aware of them. The student then has a choice whether to continue with the complications, which are, of course, familiar, or whether to go out into the unknown and try simplifying things. This is what Alexander Technique (AT) teachers, at their best, are trained to do. Much of my practice is working with singers with a skilled AT teacher. In every session we all see extraordinary acts of courage, as singers at all levels take the risk of letting go of some of their habitual tensions, and find a freedom that they have never dreamed of. Time and time again, we see a student become more themselves, without the overlay of using themselves according to their own or imagined expectations.

This transformation is also observable in work with residents in care homes for those with autism – an even more arresting thing to witness, since it is so unexpected. Many of these people have retained these physical changes, initiated in Alexander Technique lessons, over many years, and have gained fluency and freedom as a result. One of the key players in this is Robert Lada, a very distinguished teacher from Alexander Technique International and leader of a research project in somatic voice teaching at Berklee Conservatory, in Boston Mass. [i]

AT teachers deal with minute adjustments of the poise of the human body which often have a drastic effect on the functioning of the person.

The heart of the AT is expounded in this analysis by the philosopher John Dewey:

> Thus the question of integration of mind-body in action is the most practical of all questions we can ask of our civilization. . . . Until this integration is effected in the only place where it can be carried out, in action itself, we shall continue to live in a society in which a soulless and heartless materialism is compensated for by a soulful but futile idealism and spiritualism. . . for materialism is not a theory, but a condition of action. . . and spiritualism is not a theory but a state of action.
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> The more human mankind becomes, the more civilized it is, the less is there some behaviour which is purely physical and some other purely mental. So true is this statement that we may use the amount of distance which separates them in our society as a test of the lack of human development in that community. [ii]

For the present purpose, the "action" referred to is that of singing. Because the singing voice is part of the body and so delicately balanced as part of the total mechanism, the AT is particularly relevant to helping singers.

Of course, if we are radically simple about it, we feel very exposed and alone. This is the problem which AT teachers set out to address, as described by Tommy Thompson, the founder of Alexander Technique International:

> Feeling little kinship towards the body within which we give expression to our sense of 'self,' we create our own support and hold ourselves together by 'doing' something, by 'holding on. ' In doing this, however, we cease to allow our natural design to fulfill its function. [iii]

The conflict described here can be particularly acute when we sing. Our inner thoughts and response to the music and words are there for all to see. We feel unworthy to attract all that attention, we are afraid and we want to run away. And this leads to all sorts of complicated reactions, such as trying to avoid the situation that scares us (wanting to sing, and at the same time not be too exposed). So, perhaps the big issue is one of courage? Can we open up our voices and all that they convey to the rest of the world in spite of all these, perfectly reasonable, doubts and insecurities?

I have the enormous privilege of working with young undergraduate singers at the London College of Music, and I see this struggle between self-consciousness and artistic integrity every day of my working life. What constantly strikes me is their ability to fight and win this battle – to sing with directness and simplicity, and consequently, with enormous effectiveness. They have expert help from internationally renowned teachers and the bedrock of a supportive community which we have built up over many years. But I am nevertheless often moved beyond words by their courage and transparency.

Some Starting Points

With all this in mind, I want to identify some ways of thinking which inform our approach to music and to singing in particular, and to point up some of the advantages and dangers of each one. This is not an exhaustive list (of course) and it may be that the list could be drawn up in other ways. But it aims to give an overall view of the main possibilities.

Utilitarianism

The default setting of most public debate on cultural and ethical issues is nearly always utilitarian. That is to say, it is assumed that whatever produces the greatest good for the greatest number is the right thing to do. This is one of the standard definitions. Utilitarianism is:

- the doctrine that actions are right if they are useful or for the benefit of a majority.
- the doctrine that an action is right in so far as it promotes happiness, and that the greatest happiness of the greatest number should be the guiding principle of conduct. [iv]

It is very clear that it is this thinking which underlies most mass singing projects in the UK, for example. [v] In this model, singing is assessed for its usefulness in producing results. So, according to this model, the more people we can involve the better, and if we can produce some kind of systematic social scientific research to demonstrate the good effects of singing for the participants, that is better. This is, for example, exactly what the Sidney de Haan centre in Kent sets out to do. Their aim is to use singing for "the promotion of well-being and health of individuals and communities." [vi]

There are huge fundamental theoretical questions unanswered in the utilitarian model. Who decides what is the "greater good" for the masses who are the subject of this analysis? And is this a measurement of quality or quantity, and if (as it must surely be) of quality, how are we to define what is better than something else? For all these reasons, this is a profoundly confused model for running human affairs, and we probably can ascribe many of our present difficulties to it.

In relation to the present discussion, the most fundamental problem with this model, in my submission, is that this it involves assessing music for its usefulness. That is to say, it exists, not for itself, but to further some other purpose. It will probably be obvious to most of us who actually do it that music is not a means to another end, but an end in itself. For example, a singing teacher whose career was interrupted by severe illness told me "I still warm up (my voice) every day. It's part of who I am."

The utilitarian model of music-making is superficially scientific, of course, inasmuch as it relies on measurement which seems to be objective. But scientists themselves have a more nuanced view of usefulness and its relationship to creativity The work of Thomas Kuhn, for example, suggests that creative thinking is of much more fundamental importance than the Sidney de Haan project would indicate – that it is crucial in leaps forward "paradigm shifts" in scientific discovery. We must be careful not to define the "benefits" of singing, and music-making generally, too narrowly, or we might miss the point altogether!

No doubt it is right that policy-makers should ask for data which aspires to be objective. But the benefits of singing are not so easily pigeon-holed.

Romanticism[vii]

The idea of music as human will – a deep well of inspiration which informs our music making, will be familiar to many of us, and is very deep rooted in our culture. It developed , in historical terms, in contrast to classicism (below).

One of the great descriptions of romanticism is that of Isaiah Berlin, and this is how he describes the "*great break in European consciousness*"between roughly 1760 and 1830:

> The values to which they (ie the romantics) attached the highest importance were values such as integrity, sincerity, readiness to sacrifice one's life to some inner

> light, dedication to some ideal for which it is worth sacrificing all that one is, for which it is worth both living and dying. - - - - they were not primarily interested in knowledge, nor the advance of science, not interested in political power, not interested in happiness, not interested, above all in adjustment with life, - - - -
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> What people admired was wholeheartedness, sincerity, purity of soul;, the ability and readiness to dedicate yourself to your idea, no matter what it was. [viii]

This is probably the model with which many artists would feel most affinity. But it involves an idea of the self which is controversial. The idea of self-expression at any price, although possibly superficially popular, runs counter to the much more meditative and reflective view taken by an increasing number of musicians (although it has probably been there for centuries, but less acknowledged)

In an interview with Barrie Gavin, the composer Jonathan Harvey, explains a much more sophisticated view of the self, in relation to music composition. This analysis is, possibly even more acutely applicable to singing performance. He says:

> The self gets in the way - -it is not helpful for the music coming clearly through. In Buddhism, the self is something we make up, as an illusion, for our own purposes.

At the same time, he recognises the romantic myth of the artist, and compares an artist in this sense to *a priest – someone with a strong connection to life which people can relate to.* And discussing another side of Buddhism, he talks about Zen monks *trying to force the bourgeois out of their too rigid ideas*" through play. [ix]

For singers, the idea of singing as expressing the personality and intention (or, in the terms referred to above, the "will") of the performer is a very powerful one, and most people would regard it as crucial. But, of course, it is one of several components of the performing persona, and we would do well to keep it in context.

Romanticism has had an extremely profound effect on artistic thinking in our (western) culture. According to Berlin, more recent developments in western philosophy are derived from it. It was romanticism which *made existentialism possible* [x] *f*or example. And it is fairly clear, I suppose, that the acknowledgement of the fragmentation of reality which is post-modernism could not have happened without the celebration of artistic difference pioneered by romanticism.

And arguably, post-modern thinking, the celebration of play and chance as against any philosophical coherence, is a further development of existentialism, since, if we are to be authentic in the moment, each moment is unexpected and unscripted.

Classicism

Classicism - "generally associated with harmony, restraint, and adherence to recognized standards of form and craftsmanship," [xi] the idea that the fundamentals of art (and in this case, of music) are a given and define what is right and worthwhile and what is not. I had an interesting conversation with someone when we were listening to a choir yesterday. He was a bit embarrassed by what he thought was a lack of expertise about singing, but there was clearly a problem with the top line of the melody at one point. He thought about it, and said "I don't know anything about singing, but that is flat" What I heard in the singing that he was talking about was fear, a fear, ironically, of being wrong and therefore holding on to the vocal mechanisms which should have been responding freely to the music and flow of air which comes from the human response to it. The interesting thing about his response was that he was appealing to something which he considered a given, universal standard, accuracy of pitch. Of course, the idea of accurate pitch immediately brings up all sorts of problems. Are we talking about baroque pitch

(A =435) or so called concert pitch (440) or the higher pitch which is now standard in some orchestras?

But the interesting thing about this conversation is that it reminds us that many people in our western culture do think that there is some sort of absolute standard and requirement in singing, and it is something to which they may appeal especially when they feel uncomfortable or unconfident about their own ability to sing or know how to listen to singing.

It should be said that there is a very strong reaction to this idea of a given, absolute standard going on at the moment. I attended a talk by Daniel Leech- Wilkinson at the IMR in London [xii] in which he says:

> One of the important functions of art is to be a critical voice in relation to society, cultural contingencies, the status quo. As a form of art-making, classical music performance seems largely to have lost this function, residing instead in an idealised world that resists change, a kind of utopia in sound, in which, whatever the conflicts a composer engineers, everything always turns out well in the end. Even the dramatic conflicts along the way tend to be ironed out in performance by the demand for faultless playing. Music no longer promotes a critical stance for the artist-musician and for those who receive it, and in the long term (and we suggest that term is already up) it cannot be sustained as art (rather than kitsch) unless it establishes such a critical function for itself.

This is a pretty radical stance for a professor at Kings College London, and underlines the seriousness of the problem. I have been particularly aware of it in relation to opera performances. I recently attended a performance of Verdi's *Nabucco* at the Deutsche Oper in Berlin, after which I was left with the very strong impression that the aim was not to produce an authentically experienced and sung experience of this music, but to enact some strange self-conscious rite for artistically inclined members of the bourgeousie.

The presentation given by David Moss at the Singing Symposium in July 2013 shows another radical approach to, in his case, choir singing. But it has in common with Daniel Leech Wilkinson that it does not recognize the authority of "the way things ought to be done" and promotes more expressive freedom by challenging those assumptions. In this respect, both these approaches (Leech Wilkinson and David Moss) are based on the romantic idea that individual expression takes precedence overall other considerations, but take that idea to a further stage, where all variations on the original, self-expressive theme, are equally important.

Conclusion

Of course, most of us will appeal to or use all of these systems of thought at different times. What matters, I suggest, is that we are clear about what we are doing, and understand the limitations of the argument. That is to say, for example, that if we argue for, say an Arts Council grant in the UK on the grounds that hundreds of disadvantaged children will be reached, and their lives improved by this activity, we understand that this, utilitarian argument, is only part of the picture. The will to express themselves on the part of those children is a very important part of their humanity, which we/they suppress at our peril (possibly an argument from romanticism). And we might also be aware that the great traditions of music , and the cultural sophistication which goes with them, is something which we should all endeavor tonourish and sustain, and something which young people from any background have the right to benefit from (an argument from classicism).

And this clarity can only help us creatively and in creating clear artistic policy. We have everything to gain, in effectiveness. And we have nothing to lose intellectually but our muddle.

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[i] http://www. berklee. edu/people/bob-lada

[ii] Body and Mind. " Dewey, 1931p 304 Quoted by David B Mills: http://www. ati-net. com/index. php

[iii] http://www. ati-net. com/articles/thompson. php

[iv] oxforddictionaries. com/**definition**/english/**utilitarianism** 23. 9. 13

[v] Sidney de Haan Research centre: The Sidney De Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health is committed to researching the potential value of music, and other participative arts activities, in the promotion of well-being and health of individuals and communities.

[vi] See i above

[vii] Oxford Dictionary on line 3 July 2013 a movement in the arts and literature which originated in the late 18th century, emphasizing inspiration, subjectivity, and the primacy of the individual. Often contrasted with classicism. Romanticism was a reaction against the order and restraint of classicism and neoclassicism, and a rejection of the rationalism which characterized the Enlightenment. In music, the period embraces much of the 19th century, with composers including Schubert, Schumann, Liszt, and Wagner. Writers exemplifying the movement include Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats; among romantic painters are such stylistically diverse artists as William Blake, J. M. W. Turner, Delacroix, and Goya

[viii] Berlin, Isaiah, The roots of romanticism, pub Pimlico 2000 p 8,9

[ix] Jonathan Harvey, Interview with Barrie Gavin70th anniversary boxed set pub Sargasso. 2009

[x] Op cit p139

[xi] OED 3. 7. 2013. Classicism: the following of ancient Greek or Roman principles and style in art and literature, generally associated with harmony, restraint, and adherence to recognized standards of form and craftsmanship, especially from the Renaissance to the 18th century. Often contrasted with romanticism. the following of traditional and long-established theories or styles: *he would never substitute arid classicism for personal taste and character*

[xii] Daniel Leech-Wilkinson: Talk at Institute for Musical Research, School of Advanced Studies, University of London, 23rd June 2013.