

# Being a Singer: A Sociological Analysis of the Role Identity of University Voice Majors

Brian A. Roberts  
Memorial University of Newfoundland

*I think what it comes down to is that your voice is attached to you, you can't ever put it away. So singers tend to get this kind of involvement with their instrument you know and it becomes kind of like an attachment. (V10: 12, 428-435)*

Singers both rejoice and suffer under the weight of their instrument. It becomes not only a major part of their identity but, in many cases, it becomes their central or "master status" (Hughes, 1945). This research examines the construction of an identity as a singer by fifteen music education majors studying voice as their principal instrument in four Canadian universities.

The data arises from long semi-structured interviews with these singers undertaken during their time in university. While this report is a new analysis based on the idiosyncratic features of singers, the data arose in the first instance for the books *A Place to Play* (Roberts, 1991) and *I, Musician* (Roberts, 1993). Since these books have gained a foothold in the music education literature, and in the interest of time and space, I will leave more detailed descriptions of the general background to those who would pursue it elsewhere.

While music education students who study voice as their principal instrument exhibit many of the same qualities as music students generally, as outlined in the two books mentioned earlier, they also have quite distinct characteristics. Some of these characteristics are unique while others are similar to those of music students generally but are disguised and therefore need interpretation. The student's comment which opens this paper strikes at the core of the issue for singers. Physically we are our total instrument. We don't use reeds or strings, mouthpieces or bows and our art of communication is confounded musically by an interest, at least by the listener, in text.

Singers come to schools of music with a wider background variation than most other instrumental performers. Some interviewees focused their attention on singing at very early ages such as this student who says,

when I was about 4 years old I started singing for a radio show. (V10: 1, 9-11)

or this student who waited for primary school and suggests that she gained her first serious interest,

Probably grade 1 'cause I sang "All I want for Christmas", I sang that in grade 1 and I loved it and I said I want to be a singer. (M1-4: 2, 69-73)

Occasionally students would indicate a general "around the house" environment as the kick-off for their interest as in the case of this student who told me,

I've always loved to sing and because my mother sings a lot around the house and I knew I always wanted to sing. (A3:2, 58-61)

Most, however, waited until high school to *discover* their voices as a serious thing and most recount having major identity boosting experiences related to their singing as in this case,

**Q> Were you a star in high school? A>**Yea, the last three years. I was a big fish in a little place. (M4-7: 3, 108-112)

or suggestions as to their relative social status as a successful singer as in this example,

Well, I was always on top coming up through with my voice. (P6:3,65-67)

As a result, when it came time to audition for the music school, the majority of singers based their "authority" on performance successes such as this student who reports,

I just finished doing "My Fair Lady" and I finished doing the festival, the Kiwanis, all 6 categories so I was in good shape for the audition. (M4-7: 4, 142-146)

This is quite a different profile from pianists, for example, who more typically point to many years of study under this or that teacher and conservatory exams at this or that level. I am not suggesting that no student of singing comes with these credentials, but the interviews suggest a more experience model rather than a prior tuition model. This is significant because it plays an important part in the view of singers in the music school and also among the singers themselves, particularly at points of formal evaluation. Singers "discover" their voices while other music students learn to play instruments. This is so central to the difference that it can be quite eloquently summed up with this student's comment when he says,

I'm a singer and I play flute. (E7: 1, 10-11)

This is perhaps the strongest statement made in this paper since it represents the core of the consolidation of self as singer. This next singer presents a good starting place to examine briefly the theoretical underpinning of self as singer. She told me,

I've always wanted to do music. I've always wanted to sing. I've always wanted to be famous! (M1-4: 2, 57-61)

Thus when McCall and Simmons (1978, p. 65) write that "role-identity is his imaginative view of himself as he likes to think of himself being and acting as an occupant of that position", it is clear that any requirements for this student to make this claim remain solely in her own perception of that reality. Although

unlike Thurber's "Walter Mitty", if this student can conduct herself in a manner which is somehow consistent (and fulfilling of) the specific contents of her imaginative view of herself, that view becomes a legitimate one. McCall and Simmons' text (1978, p. 69-70) suggests that many of our best role-performances take place purely in fantasy and imagination. They continue,

Yet if one does claim identities in this way, interpersonally, the legitimation of them is no longer so easy. He has not only to persuade himself that his views of himself are true enough, but he also has to act in such ways that identities he has claimed before the other people are not disconfirmed in their eyes, for otherwise he is right back where he started - with no identity but in need of one.

With this in mind, we need to seek out confirmation that singers, such as our "famous" one above, conduct themselves in music schools in a way consistent with that view. In this example we see many of these characteristics present.

Singers come in and they're walking around like this and emoting all over the place and oh I can't talk to you right now, .....that kind of thing. And they throw scarves around their necks which I always found very amusing, but anyway, you know. (V10: 13, 472-475)

It was not uncommon to see singers using common strategies such as flinging long scarves around their necks in early September or carrying specific scores around with them. This was particularly important to disassociate oneself as an "opera" singer from other singers around the building. This is not a situation limited to Canadian universities either. Last fall, when lecturing in Göteborg, Sweden, I was not so very surprised to see the "opera school" locked away in the far back corner of the building, quite aloof from the rest of the singers and musicians in the building. Their physical separation was only a symbol of what turned out to be an even more compelling social isolation.

Back in Canada again, non-voice major students carry around trumpets and violins as status symbols. Voice majors have no "cases" for their instruments and therefore need to replace this symbols with such artefacts as scarves. As for the scores, this is a typical music school prop designed for use to indicate one's level of performance since the hierarchy of instrument specific literature is reasonably well known and quite standardized in institutions. It was not uncommon to see pianists carrying around scores of concertos which they were not learning (seriously) but might be klimpering around with enough to justify carrying the score in plain sight. Singers buy into this use of prop with equal gusto and carry opera scores and oratorio scores of all sorts, while all the time merely looking for something they might be able to sing.

The nature of the confusion in singers between themselves as "person" and themselves as "singer" carries considerable weight in the social world of music schools. Ability as a singer, and as we shall see in a moment, gift of voice, spills over into a quality of self. Reductionists might simply say "great singer - great person". Of course the danger comes, from an educational perspective, when the singer views themselves or is viewed by others as a poor singer. This, unfortunately, can just as easily be translated into poor person. This student explained it to me this way.

the musical ability that they (voice performance majors) perceived themselves having usually spilled over into an impression of intellectual superiority. (P8: 16, 650-654)

While intellectual superiority may be the language, further exploration into the transcript and one easily discerns that this is a value of self. This student combines the two into a single view of self when she says,

I guess just over all what they think of you as a musician and as a person in general. (P7: 31, 1157-1161)

Another student told me about the view of another performance major when she said,

we generally sensed that because she was a performance major, she had a perception of herself as somehow being a superior musician and obviously that was important to her as a performance major and that tended to make her outlook rather exclusive and consequently she was really standing alone. (P8: 15, 592-600)

Voice majors in these institutions construct a special status for themselves, a sort of invisible community (Cohen, 1985, p. 15) or a sense of what Toennies first called "Gemeinschaft" (Toennies, 1887). It was therefore not uncommon to hear reports such as this about singers.

I think voice majors are very snobby! maybe they should be, they carry their voice with them, that's their instrument. (M2-3: 13, 500-503)

or like this,

Voice majors - they just look down on people. Looks and it has to do with the eyes. Looks, just the stares. They just look at you like they're better than you. The attitude is just that they feel they're better than we are, like they have a high ideal of themselves. (M2-3: 13-14, 519-524)

It is important to realize that these views of self have very important consequences for the social interaction in the institution. Students seem to accept the necessity of this melding of singer and person in their day-to-day interactions. While they can verbalize effectively against such a confusion, they relate over and over instances where the social reality demonstrates how this impacts on their daily lives in the music school.

One common theme is the claim that faculty treat superior vocal performers differently than not such good performers. This report is not atypical.

The fact that they (faculty) value them (voice performance majors) more as a performer would leave the other impression to think that maybe they feel the same way about them (as people). (P6:22, 815-819)

It must be clear now that getting, and of course, keeping a positive self-image as a singer contributes significantly to getting and keeping a concomitant image of self as a person. It is therefore very important to voice majors to establish

how their singing (and hence person) will be evaluated. This is one area which dramatically differentiates singers from the rest of the music student population. Instrumentalists can have broken strings, sticky valves or out-of-tune pianos, but in the end, if you want a better saxophone or violin sound you can always buy a better instrument. In fact, it is not uncommon to hear that claim at the end of any concert. "If I could just afford a Stradivarius I would sound so much better." Well wouldn't we all? But the voice major is stuck with whatever equipment model was available at the time. There is considerable literature on voice building which claims that voices can be built into better and better sounding instruments but, in the end, anatomical limitations will win out and voices are simply as they are, for better - or for worse.

This student offers a fine place to begin this evaluative investigation.

**Q> Is this perception of yourself as a good musician important to you? A>**

Yes, I think it is, particularly being a singer I find that it is a personal thing. If people hate your voice, there isn't much you can do about it really, unless it is a very obvious technical thing that is causing the problem. If you are just stuck with an unpleasant sounding instrument, then it could be, I think, rather demoralizing and not just the sound you make, but, of course, if you are . . . if you had a marvelous voice, as some people I know have been blessed with, marvelous, a very good voice and absolutely no musicality, no sensitivity to style or expressiveness or they are an absolute dullard when it comes to simple rhythms and things - I think that people realize that pretty soon you just get sort of relegated to that pitied lot who has talent but no brains to do anything with it. (P8: 9, 346-372)

Here we can discover several of the important parameters which play into this category. There is certainly a discussion about the quality of the voice. This can be good or bad, common or unique. In fact, a unique voice is frequently seen as a good thing by students as shown in this example,

It was just a nice voice, like a hundred million other nice voices. And if you're going to perform that's no good. The voice has to be different. (M1-6: 7, 244-248)

Another consideration is the notion that singing can be influenced by technique as a separate category independent of tone quality. There is also a notion of musicianship as a distinct category from vocal quality and this is often equated with "brains" or intellectual ability associated with performing. All of these categories play an important part in the perception of evaluation and subsequently in the construction of a personal identity. This plays out in large measure with academic evaluation as this student points out when she asks,

but why should that person get a 90% just because she has this wonderful voice? (A3: 30, 1112-1116)

Why indeed? If an academically brilliant student were to get high 90's without studying would anyone complain? Is this academic gift any less significant? But where vocal gift is clearly unequally distributed, students look for ways to question the value of such innate beginnings to the evaluative process. This is in contrast to another student who simply states,

I felt I had a better chance at getting into voice than I would have on piano with all the piano majors who had practiced 5 hours a day. (M4-7: 1-2, 38-42) because, as she points out,

. . . in voice I felt I had more natural ability, I had more advantage going through for voice. (M4-7: 1, 32-35)

Many singers relish singing because it often appears not to be constrained by the many hours of practice endured by other instrumentalists. This comment for example,

Practicing was boring. I'd rather play the pieces. I like to practice piano when I'm mad - when I've got nothing else to do. I sing all the time. (M1-4: 3, 91-99)

This points to a typical complaint about practice. Voice students clearly cannot sing for hours on end like pianists can practice. But in the professional world, the demands on singing time is considerably greater than most voice majors would wish to admit. Nevertheless, there is much that is needed in learning vocal music in addition to "singing" time. Studying texts and languages and learning and memorizing texts and meanings, inflection and subtle language nuances all must clearly fall under the heading of practice. The strong view remains, however, that this natural ability will carry the student through. Another indication to students that such is the case comes in the perception of labelling. This student's claims, for instance, that

Voice, for instance, I feel the first year I was in here I was labelled because I never got a high mark and I was disappointed because I felt I deserved it. (P6:6, 203-207)

This student goes on to explain that her voice rather than her singing is the problem here and that this is patently unfair.

I think you're put in a slot when you arrive here and you basically stay there. (P6:6, 195-198)

There is no easy answer to this problem. Hard work goes a long way but some voices simply sound much better than others and this is quite likely to impact on the grading practices. Students are quite candid about the "real world" impact of these differences. This student told me, for example,

It depends. In the real world that's the way it's gonna happen anyway, right? If you're getting up there and Joe 1 and Joe 2 are auditioning for the same thing, it's not going to matter how much they've improved from the way they used to sing. It's gonna matter how they sing at that particular moment in time. (A3: 28, 1033-1041)

and even for the best people, this student suggests that her friends say,

I'm going to be great and they show up at the audition and there's five hundred other other people there who are just as great as they are. And you know it's kind of like the real kick in the stomach. (V10: 18, 656-662)

One other theme which is missing from most profiles of instrumentalists but common among singers is the notion of "gift". Few trumpet players would worry about whether or not they used their horns. In fact, I was once a trumpet major and when I decided to take up voice seriously I simply sold my trumpet. This was a rational decision which is predicated on the notion that if I need another trumpet one day I can simply go and get another. Such is not the case with voice. Hence many vocalists look on their instrument as a gift which must be used.

well it's an attitude that because this thing (voice) has been given to you, you know, that you're driven to use it, and other people have to make allowances for you because of your voice. I've seen it, I've seen it but it's hard to describe. (V10: 13, 455-461)

On the other hand, the voice is also viewed as a curse.

...and you could tell who thought of it like a curse, you know, like I'm cursed with this voice and I can't do anything about it and other people do, others are very comfortable with it. (V10: 12, 438-443)

There is no question that a preoccupation with "singer-self" is a reasonably typical orientation for a singer. Every little inconvenience to normal people around them can constitute an environmental disaster for the singer. The air can be too cold, too moist, too hot, too dry, too smokey, too much or too little of anything. The instrument is the body and anything which impacts on the body can become a disaster. The singer is too tired, too hungry, or has a little inconvenient sore throat which most would not notice all can lead to consequences. It is little wonder that these things become symbolized in the music school culture.

Identity construction for singers in the music school setting is a complicated career process. Being a singer is not part of some egalitarian utopia. Hargreaves writes that once one considers a group, it is the differences between members that is stressed. The "key notion in this process of differentiation is that members are ranked into a set of hierarchies, by which in certain respects some members are more valued by the group than are other members (Hargreaves, 1975, p. 97).

Singers, as a group, are governed by this imperative. The strategies they use to select and hold on to their rung on the ladder make fascinating study. I hope that this brief paper has convinced you of the power of this identity construction imperative and shown some of the interesting aspects of life as a singer in a university school of music.

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