

“I’m Really NOT a Singer”: Examining the Meaning of the Word *Singer* and *Non-Singer* and the Relationship Their Meaning Holds in Providing a Musical Education to Schools

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I am not a singer. Singers use music to express themselves and their feelings. (J. Marsanico, September, 1999, collected from a survey given in Folk Song as Social History course at Boston University)

I am definitely not a singer. I rarely ever sing unless I sing in a large group. To be a singer you need to sing on a regular basis, just for the act of singing. (A. Zwick, September, 1999, collected from a survey taken in Folk Song as Social History course at Boston University)

I am not a singer because I can’t carry a tune. (E. Mitchell, September, 1999, collected from a survey given in Ways of Knowing in the Arts course, Clark University)

I entered the Music Workshop course with trepidation. Of all the Masters courses I feared this one the most. My experiences with music have always been negative ones. As I entered the classroom, memories surfaced of the time I was told to mouth the words so I would not throw the rest of the class off key and when I was laughed off the stage after a friend and I attempted a rendition of “Rolling Over the Billows.” After that, I was convinced I should not sing.” (K. Gillette, elementary teacher, March 25, 2001, Boise, ID, music workshop final paper)

Over the past thirty years I have heard these types of statements from literally hundreds of teachers. They all share a fear of singing and all hold a strong belief that they are “non-singers.” They are convinced they can’t and shouldn’t sing. The risk of singing, in their minds, is not worth the consequences.

Without fail, they chant the same, familiar tunes. “I can’t sing,” they tell me. “I never sing with my students because I don’t know how to sing,” they confess. “I can’t carry a tune, never have been able to, never will.” “I’m tone deaf.” They make these confessions to me with great certainty.

After repeatedly hearing these statements, my curiosity was peaked. Why do so many teachers consider themselves to be “non-singers”? From where does this belief originate? Why are they so convinced they can’t sing? What is the real meaning behind these statements?

I launched into a research study to examine these phrases and unpack the meaning that lies beneath them. These phrases seem at first glance to be rather innocuous. Certainly almost everyone today presumes to know what it means to sing or to be a singer. When we hear someone proclaim she or he is a good singer or that they get their students singing, most all of us just assume we know what they mean. We certainly do not stop to analyze the words in depth. But surprisingly, as the data in my study revealed, this simple phenomenon, the act of singing, is wedded to a multitude of assumptions and beliefs and is complex. It is associated

with subtle nuances, varied philosophies, strongly held convictions, and even exclusionary practices.

I asked the participants in my study to respond to a series of questions about their perception of "singing" and "singer." I asked them: What is a singer? Are you one? How do you know that? The participants' responses varied as to what and who qualified as a singer. None of them felt they qualified and therefore, put themselves in the "non-singer" category.

What was most curious to me was the certainty with which the interviewees "knew" they couldn't sing. They made emphatic statements such as:

I was just part of the chorus. That's how I *knew* I was no good. (J. Marsanico, taken from interview transcript, 11/1/99)

I wasn't chosen to lead songs. I got a message that I wasn't good at singing. (O. Clarke, taken from interview transcript, 1/15/99)

I became a chorus member and never chosen for solos and I *knew* the message was that I'm not good at singing. (S. Soler, taken from interview transcript, 10/21/99)

I learned a lot about music and I *knew* I couldn't sing. I couldn't get the tune or sing on pitch. I really can't sing. (A. Zwick, taken from interview transcript, 11/5/99)

I was puzzled, at first glance, from the data. I couldn't understand how they "knew" they weren't singers. Where and how did they receive that message? None of the interviewees were directly told they didn't have a good voice. Yet they seemed convinced that they were not good at singing, that they really couldn't sing.

One statement, made from one of the interviewees in the study, provided some clarity into the answer to these questions. She was the only non-white interviewee and defined herself as bi-cultural. She was born in Barbados and moved to the United States when she was four years old. She often returns to visit extended family. In her interview, she mentions that she and her family continue to listen to Calypso and Solka music and she considers that to be "her" music. It is the music that makes her feel happy.

She was convinced she was a "non-singer." I asked how she knew this about herself. She was unclear at first and seemed puzzled by my question. After furthering questioning she looked at me with surprise and said, "Now that I think about it, when I go home to Barbados I am a "singer." I'm just not a "singer" in this country" (O. Clarke, excerpt interview transcript, 11/15/99).

She went on to explain that she considers herself a "non-singer" in the United States because she believes a "singer" in the U.S. is someone who can lead songs, sing solos and perform easily. She feels she can't do that. In Barbados, a culture that has a different historical, social and cultural construct about the meaning of singing, a "singer" is someone who sings fast, upbeat songs. Participation is key to being a "singer", rather than performance. She qualifies as a "singer" in Barbados.

This data unearthed a new perspective in understanding this problem and led me to review the literature in search of the specific ways in history, culture, society have constructed a belief

system around "singing" in the United States. I particularly wanted to see the connection to education.

The Role of Singing in Early America

From the earliest British settlements in New England, beginning in 1620, the meaning around the word "singing" was formulated and this early construction highly influenced the foundation of the word, as we understand it today. *The Bay Psalm Book* was the first book printed in the New England colonies but it had no musical notation of any kind. Church parishioners were expected to use other tune books to determine which melodies to sing during the church service.

Due somewhat to the lack of clarity of tune selection, singing became rather chaotic and considered by most to be "crude and barbarous" (Birge, 1937, p. 6) and this attitude about church singing, once formulated by the dominant culture, continued well into the eighteenth century. During that time period, Reverend Thomas Walter is quoted as saying,

The tunes are now miserably tortured and twisted and quavered in our churches, into a horrid medley of confused and disorderly voices. Our tunes are left to the mercy of every unskilled throat to chop and alter, to twist and change, according to their infinitely diverse, and no less odd humours and fancies. (Birge, 1932, p.5)

The frustration with the quality of singing, voiced by the church leaders, and consequent attempts to improve the vocal performances of the congregation, gradually manifested itself in a formal recognition and a singling out of the "better singers." The superior singers sat together in a group, separated from the other parishioners and were under the leadership of a choir director. In addition, many historical accounts note that these more musical singers were able to add embellishments to the tune and sing faster and higher than their fellow, less musical parishioners.

This seemingly harmless and even logical chain of events laid several important foundations that greatly impacted the meaning of singing. A judgmental attitude prevailed that suggested that singing was not acceptable unless performed in a particular way. Those particular ways began to be named and certain qualities of singing were linked with "better" and others devalued. For instance, high value was placed on those who could sing higher and faster and add musical embellishments to the tunes.

In the act of naming the "better singers," the language of singing assumed a category of "singer." With the formation of this category came assumptions and beliefs about the qualifications and skills needed to fall into the "singer" category. Many were left falling outside that category and were told not to sing. They, by default, became the "non-singers."

There is little documentation on the specifics of how the "better singers" were chosen or who the decision-makers were but I believe that it was these kinds of decisions that left a lasting impression on the ways we Westerners perceive singing. It is already noted, in historical accounts, that those who sang *faster and higher* were considered better. This assumption alone manifests itself today, in what I refer to as the "soprano syndrome."

These data from my research study revealed that many women today confess that they have felt devastated by having been "deselected" from the soprano section and moved to the

alto section. This move, for them, translates to mean that they can't sing. For many women the move has actually caused them to stop singing. For example, the following story was shared recently with me and illustrates this point:

In the seventh grade, I had a teacher who told me I was not a soprano but an alto so she moved me to the alto section and then she told me I needed to sing quietly. I believed that being an alto meant your voice wasn't good enough to sing soprano. I grew up thinking I couldn't sing. I only sang to myself so no one could hear me. (S. Riley, classroom teacher, North Attleboro, MA. 4/23/99, from final paper for Music Workshop course)

The Singing School Movement

To improve that quality of their parishioner's singing, formal singing schools were formed and promoted by the early New England ministers. These schools focused on teaching note reading and improving voices. Anyone who could afford to receive this instruction worked at obtaining these skills. Those attending the singing schools came to internalize, as truth, that it was not possible to be considered a singer unless you were musically literate. "Singing" became an elite activity.

By the late eighteenth century in the United States, singing had developed into a perfected art and was connected with words and catch phrases such as *singer*, *non-singer*, *talented*, *non-talented*, *musical ear*, *vocal range*, *musically literate* and *voice improvement*. This mono-cultural construction certainly did not consider singing to be natural phenomenon but rather something that, if one was properly taught, could be learned.

Singing Introduced into the Public School Setting

It was not until 1840 that public schools became part of the American educational system. In conjunction with the establishment of a nationwide system of public education, school music programs were developed. The first music education program in the U.S. had a powerful influence on crystallizing the meaning of singing for the next two hundred years and began in Boston, Massachusetts.

Lowell Mason (1792-1873) "probably one of the most influential figures in the history of music education in the United States" (Mark, 1982, p.127), had a major impact on music education, the most significant of which, I believe, was his construction of the meaning of singing and his philosophy and pedagogy. His approach to singing, his justification about why and how it should be taught, what he valued and how he named it has had a lasting imprint on the attitudes, beliefs and assumptions of music educators, general education teachers and students currently hold about singing today.

To Mason's credit, he strongly campaigned for music to be a regular part of the curriculum in the public schools and thus "break down the doctrine that singing was for the talented few and show that these foundations were largely mythical" (Birge, 1932, p. 36). He used methods of teaching singing that he fervently believed would "encourage variety and gratify students, improve the voice and give the teacher a chance to correct *faulty tone production*" (Mark & Gary, 1992, p.129). He stressed the fact that "vocal music cannot be taught in a short time as it is more difficult than learning Latin or Greek because it demands a cultivation

of taste which can only be brought about by industrious, patient, and persevering practice”(Mark & Gary 1992 p.129). Mason stressed that learning to sing was a time consuming, energy laden, arduous task.

Mason’s pedagogical approach to singing, which was widely adapted in New England’s public schools and beyond, solidified a meaning around singing in school environments. Most importantly, Mason’s philosophy perpetuated the belief that students need to be taught to sing. This philosophy is based on a profound cultural assumption and has had major consequences on the ways in which we perceive, interpret, teach and experience singing in educational settings in this country.

By the time Lowell Mason died in 1872, music programs had cropped up in several states across the country and school music teachers were faced with the task of teaching vocal music to every child. Systematic instructional music material began to appear in print, reflecting an attitude expressed by members of school boards and administrators that if music is to be included in the curriculum it must be a subject that is organized scientifically and in a way that can be evaluated accurately. The teaching of music reading continued as a major focus in vocal music but the methods created to accomplish music literacy differed widely.

Singing as a Professional Activity in Education

Singing, along with other music instruction in the public schools was rapidly becoming a fully recognized professional activity. Professional organizations and certification programs were established to develop leaders in all musical fields. Singing was still the fundamental musical activity but there was an even more intentional goal on having every child learn to read music.

The move towards professionalism added yet another dimension to the meaning of singing for educators. As music became more specialized and certificate programs were created to specifically train specialists, the classroom teacher was phased out of her role as music teacher. The result of this move to professionalism, although positive for the music education profession, left the classroom teacher feeling inadequate as a singing teacher and a singer. To engage in singing with students meant acquiring specific skills and necessary certification that could only be obtained through additional training. Singing had become a fine art to be taught only by skilled musicians.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Where does this examination and research leave us? Why explore this phenomenon at all? What are the consequences of such an exploration?

Examining the meaning of singing provides insights into the ways the meaning of this word and related words have developed, changed, and transformed in the United States over the period of approximately two hundred years, particularly as it was implemented in educational settings. This process, I believe, has great value and provides us with an opportunity to learn and reflect on teaching practices and philosophies that have perhaps been left unchallenged for several generations. It forces us to face assumptions, cultural beliefs and biases about this most seemingly simple concept: “singing” and it represents the ways in which culture and society play a powerful role in framing our belief systems. This belief system is embedded in our

educational system and most certainly permeates the philosophical framework of music education as it currently exists.

Once assumptions and biases are uncovered, new possibilities for perceiving in other ways are available for exploration and discovery. Engaging in this process is, in Maxine Greene's words, "to tap into imagination and become able to break with what is supposedly fixed and finished. It is to see beyond what the imaginer has called normal or common-sense and to carve out new order in experience" (Greene, 1995, p. 19).

That, for me, is my interest in this exploration. I want to carve out a new order of experience. My experience has proven that when "singing" is redefined and approached from a wider cultural lens, classroom teachers, in particular, begin singing. Those self-defined "non-singers" rethink the meaning of singing and begin to include "singing" as part of their classroom activities.

General educators, music specialists and consequently students in the U.S. have, for the past two hundred years, assumed a meaning of singing that has been constructed from a mono-cultural perspective. ISME, the International Society of Music Education, made note of this recently in a call for papers for a future conference. They began by stating:

Most music education in the world has been organized around the great tradition of western classical music. This has led to an infrastructure that extends not only from Vienna to Los Angeles, but also from Cape Coast to Kuala Lumpur. Unfortunately, this solid structure has its limitations in terms of flexibility. Many large institutions for music education at all levels have difficulty responding to new social and artistic realities. (Call for Papers, ISME Commission on Community Music Activity, June 2001)

My research suggests the possibility for constructing new ways of knowing and perceiving. Singing and indeed, other forms of music making, have intrinsic value in education with far-reaching benefits that are inhibited by a mono-cultural approach. Shifting the paradigm allows for every individual voice to be heard. Diversity and ethnicity can be recognized and supported. Widening the perspective embraces all viewpoints and provides a venue for the expression of personal voice and group voice. It provides recognition that singing is rooted in the history, culture and society of all people and all perspectives make a valuable contribution to the whole.

As proof of how it is, indeed, possible to carve out a new order of experience, I conclude this paper quoting two classroom teachers, who, initially defined themselves as "non-singers," and having been presented with another way of knowing and perceiving "singing," transformed their definition and experience.

My dread of singing stemmed from the thought of singing a solo. When I realized that was not going to happen and we began to sing in small groups I realized it wasn't so painful after all. Singing became non-threatening. At first I sang quietly so no one could hear but I slowly released by voice from its 30 year self-imposed confinement and sang so people could hear me. This truly transformed my experience of singing. I was caught up in the joy of singing. It changed by idea of what music is and has left me with the desire to explore my personal musical possibilities. (K. Gillette, elementary teacher, March 25, 2001, Boise, ID, Music Workshop final paper)

When I was told that I sang badly in elementary school I was crushed and I never sang in public again. When I became a teacher, of course, I never considered singing with my students. When I came to the music course I was very apprehensive and nervous. I didn't want to sing alone. But I was happily surprised how comfortable I felt at the end of the first day. After the first weekend I couldn't wait to teach my students all the songs I'd learned. They loved it. I was shocked. Teaching my students about not being afraid to sing has helped me to start singing aloud in front of people. I explained to them that we all might not have perfect singing voices, but we still need to try. Maybe if someone had told me that when I was young it would not have been so difficult for me to see what I had been missing all these years. (T. Gilson, 11/99, Wakefield, MA, excerpt from final paper for Music Workshop)

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