

Music, the Voice of Memory: An Exploratory Approach

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Abstract

The word “memory” comes from “mind” and suggests that what is directly experienced remains in our awareness. Even though no longer physically present, experiences may be called to mind or remembered. The word “voice” or “vocal” comes from “*vox*” or “*vocare*,” meaning to call, with its cognates “*evoke*,” to call forth, and “*recall*,” to call back. The notion of memory, therefore, may be linked to the voice both calling back and, in a sense, calling forward various experiences of one’s life. To remember is to call back a voice from one’s past, to hear it again in its same form or to give it new voice. Through music, perhaps especially vocal music, we are drawn to return or called back to a place, a time, a person, and with the thoughts, feelings, and associations of that experience that remain with us still.

This paper is an attempt to explore the connection of vocal music with memory. Essential elements of this exploration include: the roots or etymologies of words connected with memory and voice; the various dimensions and meanings of memory at the level of thought, feeling, presence, and identity; the inseparably relational dimension of memory; and its flowing not only from the past into the present but also reaching into the future; and the connection of all of these with vocal music. Music may be a link to our human quest to find and express our authentic voice, within a greater relational, communal, and social context.

Introduction

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

- T.S. Eliot, “Little Gidding” (Four Quartets, 47)

On April 9, 2007, the ninetieth anniversary of the World War I battle of Vimy Ridge was remembered. During the ceremony, a young violinist stood alone beside the imposing statue of “Mother Canada,” a woman grieving for her lost children. The violinist played a gentle, haunting native melody that moved all who heard it. For a moment at least, this music reached beneath and beyond age, race, gender, and background, and evoked a collective memory and a common feeling of being Canadian.

At the site of the Battle of the Somme in Northern France, a young guide, herself a Newfoundlander, explained how an incredible percentage of the young male population of that island lost their lives during the battle. As she concluded, she quietly and emotionally sang the

strains of the Ode to Newfoundland, a single voice paying homage to the great sacrifice of these men. She could find no other way to remember and honour them.

These two events illustrate how music is able to unite people in a shared experience, to evoke and express memories, and to reach that cluster of thoughts and feelings deep within that are reflective of personal and social identity. Such occasions reveal the power of music to reach us profoundly both in an initial experience and in the way it remains present within us to influence us, to draw us back to the experience and to awaken our longing for something yet to be fulfilled. In today's world, there seems to be a real need to bring these experiences to explicit awareness. We live in an age in which there is often no canvas of silence upon which to write, hear, or remember music, but rather an endless succession of noise, including high decibel and low frequency sounds that emanate from stereo equipment of all types.

This paper is an attempt to explore the connection of vocal music with memory. These two poignant war remembrances illustrate how we draw on music to commemorate—literally to place with memory—significant events that spoken words alone are unable to reach. Often when we hear music that we associate with a particular time, place, person, or event, we do more than recall that experience. We feel again what we felt then. Past experiences remain somehow within us, able to be called again to the surface of our awareness. One of the most striking characteristics of music is its ability to evoke memory, and memory as feeling.

To create memorable music that reaches an audience, performers like those we mentioned must learn, and then, through practice, commit to memory the technique, the words, and the melodies that are written musical symbols or have been orally transmitted through generations. Here, memory is a kind of physical patterning that becomes implanted through practice and repetition, which may be drawn upon continually. Alfred Tomatis (1991), a noted French physician, discovered in his research on the human ear and his work with singers, that we can only repeat or express, in effect, remember, what we have heard (pp. 42-43).

Etymologies

The very words, "voice," "music," and "memory," have their own roots and history, and their etymologies shed light on our exploration. The word "voice" itself comes from the Latin noun *vox* and its verb form *vocare* which means to call, to emit or send forth sound, to express from within outwardly. It conveys a desire not only to express but also to communicate and to evoke a response.

"Memory," in Latin *memoria*, stems from the word for mind. It expresses the bringing to mind of what is no longer physically present. It implies that what has been experienced with awareness remains within us, and therefore can be "re-membered," brought to mind again.

The word "music" itself is named from the Muses, ancient Greek goddesses, who were the daughters of Zeus and Memory. The Muses were the source of music and all the arts, which, to the Greeks, were intrinsic to the nature of the universe. The association with memory reflects the dominance of an oral tradition, where words were uttered or sung aloud, not merely read in silence. The poet, Hesiod, conveys the deeply held conviction that poets, himself included, were indeed inspired by the Muses. They believed that a divine gift was breathed into them, enabling them to sing words of consolation and healing to fellow human beings, freeing them to forget their cares for a time, "re-calling" them away from their everyday burdens, and allowing them to tune in to the healing power of the universe (Harris & Platzner, 2004, pp. 67-69 & pp. 85-87 and King & Ripley, 2005).

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Music, in this sense, evokes, literally calls forth memory. It draws us to return to the past, to the persons and events, the thoughts, feelings, and associations that were once with us and remain still. Similarly, to recall is to call back, to bring to present thought or feeling what was once a current experience, but which has since receded from explicit consciousness. Yet it stays within us, able to be retrieved, found again, and once more given voice.

Memory and Identity

These etymologies associated with memory help us to sense more tangibly the capacity of music to bring forth into our present felt awareness, experiences, and relationships that remain active on some level within us. Music often recalls defining moments in our lives—persons or events that have shaped the direction of our lives and the kind of person we have become. These roots also suggest that music reaches beneath and beyond individual events and touches a place from which flow the deepest longings of our soul. Karl Rahner, noted theologian, has stated that at the deepest centre of a human being is an infinite longing that reaches beyond everything and everyone we directly encounter, and that this is what most truly defines us as a human being (Carr, 1980). These longings are very close to our identity and suggest that music, at least beautiful music, may both reach our identity—who we truly are—and call us to remember it. Memory in this sense can be a recalling or a being called back to who we truly are, a memory of our identity. Rockett (n.d.) observed that music can cut through all our defences and touch “the best of the condensed self (pp. 11-12).” Visser (2000), classical scholar, notes that there are moments in life when the door swings open and we glimpse ever so briefly the light behind it. We have an experience of transcendence. In ritual and drama, and we would add, music: “People come...to be led by the performance to achieve contact with transcendence, to experience delight or recognition, to understand something they never understood before, to feel relief, to stare in amazement, or to cry (p. 12).”

To convey this depth, performers themselves must reach to and perform from that same inward centre, in effect, must be in touch with and remember who they are. Members of an audience, in turn, must be open to allow music to reach the various strands of their own thoughts and feelings and the core from which they flow. Hence, memory has a relational dimension: it is at once a memory evoked by others, a memory with others, and a memory of others. And, if it is a memory of identity, it is a memory of our identity as inseparably connected with others. In a similar vein, if memory reaches to the depths of who we are, it reaches to the place of our deepest longings, those not realized, those only partially fulfilled, and those that reach beyond any present circumstance.

Physiological Aspects of Memory

Music that is expressed by the singer from his or her own centre is done in greater or lesser degree through the quality of the instrument, in this case, the voice. A key insight of Tomatis (1991) is that “one sings with one’s ear (p. 44),” and that “the voice can only produce what the ear hears (p. 53).” In other words, any alteration in the way the ear perceives the sound, profoundly affects the sound produced. Tomatis (1991) found if there was a poor quality of self-listening, there was a poor quality of singing (pp. 42-43). This realization led Tomatis to develop a filtering device that he called “The Electronic Ear.” This process helped clarify and order self-listening, and improved singing.

Madaule (1996), director of The Listening Centre in Toronto, a client, and later colleague and friend of Alfred Tomatis, has explained, developed, and further applied this work. Madaule observes that the ear has a function even more primary than hearing, that he calls "The Listening Function." He explains that the vestibular system, the first sensory system to develop in the womb, keeps us aware of our body and its position and movement in space. This body listening is the basis of communication and becomes the non-verbal dimension of listening. The cochlear system, which evolved out of the vestibular system, provides the capacity to perceive sound, and consequently to produce sound with the voice. Together the two systems form the inner ear. Music, says Madaule (1998), is a reflection of both systems; it is a composite of rhythm and melody. And yet, "rhythm and melody randomly assigned do not necessarily amount to music. The beauty of music, its greatest value, is the integration of the two (p. 38)."

A fuller integration of bodily and auditory memory may well facilitate a greater connection not only with technical memory, but also with the more interior kind of memory. This deeper connection may free the singer to move beyond the production of good vocal technique alone, and to get in touch with and sing from their feelings and deepest self, so that these will inform the technique. As T.S. Eliot, we believe, has written, the artists must perfect their technique so that when they have something to say, they will not betray it.

Memory and Feeling

Madaule (2001) states that the ear, the skin, and the nervous system have the same developmental roots, thus suggesting that listening and feeling are not two separate experiences: "Rather, listening is feeling (p. 19)." We might extend this observation beyond the linking of listening and physical sensation and bodily awareness, to that of more interior feeling. Where Madaule speaks of the "ear of the body," we might speak of the "ear of the soul," the listening and attunement to one's deepest thoughts and feelings, to one's innermost voice, and therefore, the capacity to voice this human depth. In this way, the voice is not only heard outwardly by self and others as resonant, rich, and clear, but is felt inwardly by performer and listener. When there is a matching of outer and inner voice, technique and feeling, then what is embodied is the voice of the soul, one's authentic voice, and the song of the universe.

A superb example of this memory of feelings is found in Negro Spirituals, as sung, for example by Paul Robeson, whose own father had been enslaved. When Robeson sings such spirituals as "Balm in Gilead," or "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," his singing touches, at the feeling level, the experience of being uprooted, enslaved, yet yearning for freedom. Only a person in touch with the deep and powerful feelings of suffering and hope could express them this authentically, and communicate them, in such a way as to call forth those feelings in others. We are drawn to experience and remember, not just the beauty of the singer's voice or of the music itself, but also the beauty of the human soul.

We have spoken of finding and expressing-remembering-our authentic voice: breathing it forth in word, in song, in life; giving voice to our own spirit as expression of the spirit of the universe. Yet this voice and the identity it embodies are not isolated realities. They emerge within a familial, linguistic, and cultural context, which is interwoven into any expression. They also address and reach out to that context in some way.

Our voice is at once expression and outreach, as illustrated by the ancient Greek story of Echo. Echo is condemned to repeat only what she has heard, never to initiate a conversation or engage in dialogue. Gradually her echoing voice fades away and dies. If one's voice is only an

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echo, it is without life. To be fully alive, a person must find, remember, and express their own voice, tell their own story, sing their own song. The challenge of the musician, particularly the vocal musician, is to attempt to enter within the deepest spirit of the music, and to connect that spirit with one's own thought, feeling, experience, and underlying identity. Then the musician may channel that totality not only into a technically competent expression, but into an inspired expression.

The Voice Teacher

The question becomes how to connect deeply to text and music, and how to move this connection in wider circles to include the listener. In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas, the theologian, spoke of virtue as *habitus*, an acquired disposition or inclination to act in a certain way. It is an orientation and facility built up through repeated acting in this way, so that it becomes second nature, a part of our very makeup. Once acquired, though needing regular reinforcement, this technique becomes a matter of background rather than focus, allowing persons to trust their own acquired ability, and thus freeing them to draw upon deeper levels of memory.

One may say that a primary role of the voice teacher is to facilitate good vocal memory in and for the student. This responsibility first includes introducing the student to good vocal practice, so that patterns of stance, breathing, throat position, and so forth, become ingrained in the student's physiological makeup and memory, and can be drawn upon regularly and repeatedly. There is no need, then, to start anew at each practice, but rather to trust one's memory and develop further what has already been acquired.

Another role, beyond technique, is to assist students to get in touch with and sing from their authentic feelings and deepest self, so that these will inform their technique. These may then flow into the performance, and make it more than a mere succession of notes produced by rote.

Essentially, then, before we can teach effectively and call forth the beauty of our students' singing voices, we must explore not just what we teach but where we teach from, our own inner space of music. Teaching is not simply dispensing information to another. It is, rather, engaging together in a quest to experience, create, and express together something beautiful that can and should be remembered by both student and teacher. Such a relationship establishes an environment of trust in the present and, over time, a memory of trust, so that the authentic voice may emerge and be heard as beautiful rather than judged and found wanting.

Conversely, to be in a studio where access to one's inner voice is not possible or not deemed necessary may foster musical isolation and the inevitable feeling that there is something wrong with the student—that somehow others have magically unlocked musical doors that remain closed to them. Jordan (2002 & 1999), music professor and author, calls this a form of musical abuse. He suggests that a good teacher must be in touch with that deeper place in themselves and facilitate the student reaching it as well. These opposing teaching styles and relationships may create either a life-depriving memory of frustration, self-doubt, and isolation, or a positive life-giving memory through which to build self-esteem, musicianship, and artistry (pp. 91-95 and pp. 9-10, respectively).

The Listening Centre Program

Our research into the work of Tomatis has, for the past three years, taken us to the south of France. Here we formed a friendship with Léna Tomatis who is dedicated to continuing the work of her late husband. Though not as explicit in his writings as the physiological and

scientific aspects, we have discovered in them a genuine spiritual sense. Mme Tomatis has affirmed this aspect with us, and has encouraged us to explore this direction in our work.

To give an experiential dimension to our research, we followed an individually designed program from The Listening Centre. The first, more passive phase, involved listening to the specially filtered music of Mozart and Gregorian chant. After a customary interval of several weeks, we returned to begin the more active phase of listening, in which we were able to experience our own voice in a kind of sound loop. This loop creates a relational dimension with one's own voice—the voice we hear coming from inside and the voice we hear back from outside. The exercises, using *The Electronic Ear*, included humming and the formation of vowel sounds that should feel as if they were being released at the back of the neck. This program has not only facilitated better vocal production among singers, but has far-reaching implications for assisting persons with autism, dyslexia, Attention-Deficit Disorder (ADD), and other learning difficulties.

We do not mean to imply that the same experience is possible in a singing studio or without this highly refined equipment. It seems, however, that by using similar vocal exercises in the music studio, we may not only enhance vocal technique and awareness, but also facilitate access to the voice that is deeper than one's technique alone. We believe that this experience requires that the teacher be in touch with their own authentic voice.

In recent weeks, in a studio setting, the implementation and repetition of the practice of slow, centred humming, open vowels, and their use in exploring repertoire, has made a remarkable difference in voice students. They have shown and articulated a clearly felt difference in the sound of their own voice, which is more open, more in tune, fuller, and more relaxed, even on their highest notes. They have described a greater ability to be in touch with their own feelings, and with those of the lyrics and melodies they are singing. All of them have noted a greater peacefulness both during and after singing, a sense of hearing and expressing their own true voice, and a positive connection with the world around them. In effect, the singing experience may be easier, more satisfying, and more enriching, if we begin singing, not from our clutter, but from our silence. This exercise may create a peacefulness, serenity, and centeredness similar to spiritual traditions that employ breathing and chanting practices. In any event, the students have given evidence of the blend of music and memory, interior and exterior, technique and authenticity, which we have attempted to articulate in this paper.

Conclusion

Tomatis (2005) conceived of listening as a two way process that involves receptive listening (from the outside in), and expressive listening (from the inside out) (pp. 43-44, and p. 86; Madaule, 2004, p. 15). We perceive memory, the process of remembering, to be a two way process as well, involving receptive memory (the initial experience of events and persons we draw in from outside) and expressive memory (the processed and distilled feeling level of these experiences as they remain present within us and are available for recall and expression). For Madaule (1996), "the listening function" acts as a link between the inner and outer world, serving to focus our attention selectively (p. 2). In our view, memory is a way of carrying and retaining this link between the inner and outer world. What has been experienced, sifted, and retained, remains ever present at some level within us. It fosters an awareness that music is a shared, relational reality, extending beyond the teacher and student to the composer, audience, and wider community.

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While it may not always be possible to achieve the sound or feeling that comes from our deepest self, the memory of that experience, and the memory that it was good, moves us continually to try to do so. The more we experience this depth, the more we develop a reliable memory both of technique and feeling. In this way, we come to trust the instrument, and each time we sing, we are more likely to create a memorable, holistic experience for self and others.

We come to realize how music enriches life, and we begin to understand the Greek concept of music as intrinsic to the universe. And we remember that our own voices do not merely echo, but join all the unique voices of a universe that is continually singing.

We conclude with a poem from our book, *Touching the Spirit, Reflections from the Heart*:

with you I remember who I am
with you I am more than I remember
with you there is no forgetting

Appendix

Student responses to the following three questions regarding slow humming and vowel technique with follow-up use in repertoire:

1. What do you notice or feel physically?
2. What do you notice about how you feel [emotionally] inside?
3. How do you feel now about singing and communicating your voice to others?

Madeleine (7)

1. I can feel vibrations in my neck and stomach and it just comes up slowly. It's a nice peaceful feeling. You just feel it!
2. I feel like I'm in a really small room that's dark and the door is shut and a window is just opening making beautiful music. I feel like I'm the window. It makes me feel peaceful.
3. I feel happy. I feel ready to do more things (personal communication).

Chloe (8)

1. Humming that way rings the inside of my ears and it feel like something is just telling my stomach to let the sound out. It's kind of like a zipper and I just have to pull it up and out comes the music.
2. It feels soothing and relaxing. It feels like when we sing that way our breath comes from a special spot inside-where the music really comes from.
3. I feel good about letting people hear me sing (personal communication).

Vanessa (11)

1. It feels like the sound moves in a big circle and comes back to you.
2. When you sing this way you feel like you have a partner beside you when you sing.
3. When we sing this way, the sound is clearer and better inside and outside. It comes out of your body the way you hear it inside so both of your voices match. Then you don't worry about how it will sound outside. If you can trust your inside voice, then you can trust people will like the outside one too. Now I don't feel so shy and the words and the music just carry you away. It makes you feel happier inside when you let it out and you think people will love it. It makes you want to sing (personal communication).

Meghan C. (11)

1. It feels more clear, precise, and you don't have to think about the breath. It just comes naturally and easily.
2. I hear it [voice] more clearly and I feel it way back in my neck: more open. I hear the sound ringing more in my ears. I feel more energized but calm at the same time.
3. I didn't have to think about the breath and my breath lasted longer. I like doing it this way. Everything is clearer and feels easier. I like this sound better than usual. It makes me more excited to sing and I'm more confident. I think we should always do this before you present anything because you are more relaxed and confident about sharing. You're excited about sharing instead of afraid and nervous (personal communication).

Felicia (12)

1. Sounds come out better and it [the voice] feels more powerful. It's easier, especially on the high notes. You really feel the vibrations.
2. It makes me feel peaceful and relaxed.
3. It makes you notice how much brighter your voice is. It makes it easier and makes your voice move (personal communication).

Meghan M. (16)

1. I don't feel tired anymore. I have more energy. It feels like the sound is coming from a new strange area—deeper and farther back too. It's open and easier. It flows naturally, rolling through you. I didn't feel any change in my throat.
2. I feel refreshed and notes feel effortless—just there. It felt like you've never really heard your voice before this. It's a high and I touched on something I never did before while I was singing. The piece feels more deeply moving.
3. Phrases feel different. You're just oozing the music. You're the instrument. The piano could not even be there. Nerves are gone. I think I've always had a knack for music and it was getting lost. I was focusing so hard on the technical aspects and struggling with the notes, so the musicality was lost in the technicality. Now I don't think so much and I'm free to get involved in the music and you can feel more what the song and the composer are calling for. It makes it easier too for someone who is listening to hear the song the way I'm hearing it. If you're not worried about how it's going to come off you are more able to tell a story (personal communication).

Rachel R. (13)

1. Before, it was so much effort to get the high notes.
2. Now it's just a breeze because it's so much more open.
3. Everything is so much more fluent, like everything is connected, smooth and I can actually feel the music not just the notes (personal communication).

Alyssa (14)

1. I haven't been taking lessons that long but with these exercises, it flows so much easier, it's more comfortable and the sound is just there. The notes are just there, everything comes together and high notes are effortless. My throat just does it for me to reach high notes.
2. I feel more calm [sic]; all is right with the world. Here, when I'm singing, I stand taller, not fidgety—it's all there! When I leave, everything feels so good I can't help but smile.

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3. My speaking voice even sounds different and I like it better. I think I don't strain to speak after I've been singing like this. I'm just coming from a more peaceful place, calmer, serene. I feel that my body is helping me and I'm more in touch with the words that I'm trying to convey. I feel the music and the emotions that maybe the composer was feeling; more in touch with them and it helps me feel it and convey it. My emotions come through. I can't hide them. I have a connection with the music (personal communication).

Hilary (14)

1. It's my favourite exercise. It makes me comfortable so I don't mind being louder. You [teacher] know I'm not comfortable doing that usually. This makes it easy to let it go, like you're a cello playing.
2. It feels like meditating and you're relaxed and not nervous.
3. You just feel better about singing. I don't think about you [teacher] being here so much (personal communication).

Kristen (13)

1. I feel really alert and I can feel a change in my voice. I can really feel vibrations in my neck and my throat feels really open. There's more sound, bigger sound, and it feels really good.
2. I like how it feels and what I hear. It sounds richer and fuller. There isn't much effort, it was just there.
3. I like my voice better. It's not breathy and the high notes sound better. I enjoy singing for people. It feels that people listening can feel a part of me. I don't feel scared that people won't like it [my voice] or me. I know I like it (personal communication).

Rain (8)

1. It feels really good. I'm relaxed. It feels like buzzing in my body. I didn't have to work at high notes.
2. It feels a lot different inside. My body's been vibrated...massaged. It feels like I don't have to do anything to get my good life.
3. It feels like I just leave and the music keeps on going. I feel more comfortable. I hear the music sounding like humming birds not like before like bees were forcing me to sing (personal communication).

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