

Singing: An Existential Account

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Abstract

The power of singing has a quality of representing a singer's being at a particular moment in time. We cannot capture that moment, although recordings may give us the illusion that we can, and we will only be successful as performers in so far as we manage to be authentic in that moment.

All the training of a singer, using the breath effectively, being accurate and yet free with the musical material, keeping the voice free to respond to the singer's experience of the words and the music, could be understood as training in being authentic in the moment.

The Interactive Teaching Method (ITM) of the Alexander Technique is a particularly detailed and clear way of learning to keep the self (the body, and the way of thinking about the body) available to the creative artist in the self. Sara Clethero is Head of Voice at the London College of Music (at Thames Valley University) and is commencing a doctoral thesis on practical implications of existentialism in singing performance and singing training.

We hope to demonstrate a radical new way of singing training, available and applicable to all. We have worked on the Alexander Technique in relation to singing with a range of singers from people with profound disabilities (autism) through to famous international figures and groups such as mothers and daughters in Birmingham, and the benefits are clear across the board, in terms of increased freedom of expression and vocal freedom.

It will also be argued that philosophical clarity is important if we are to live music, and particularly singing, to the full. Generalised utilitarian statements about the benefits of singing are not enough. We need to be clear what we can say to be true and why we are saying it.

Introduction

This paper will examine the relationship of philosophy, and especially of existential and post-existential philosophy, to the act of singing and the way we all experience singing, as performers and also as listeners. It is not about the philosophy of aesthetics, although this may sometimes throw incidental light on the matter, and it is not about musicology, the examination of the structures and techniques of the music itself.

I will first outline the background to these ideas in the history of thought, as I understand it, (and look briefly at the interaction of different cultures on this ground). I will explain what I take to be a possible philosophical approach and explore some of the implications for singing practice and singing training. This is partly a description of a way of working, but it is also a challenge to think differently about singing and how it relates to our place in the world. The existential debate is a radical call to exercise freedom in all aspects of our lives. Here I am focusing in on singing as a particular activity and a fundamental form of human expression. I will talk about work with the interactive form of the Alexander Technique in relation to singing, since, in spite of its associated organizational problems, it is a rigorous and minutely specific way of applying existentialism in a given moment.

This project is based on a passion for freedom and for wishing to share the benefits of that freedom in singing. It is also based on the conviction that singing reflects authentic existence in a way that no other instrument does.

Overview

The question that this research was designed to answer is: What is going on when we sing or when we encourage a student to sing “better?” There are, of course, plenty of studies on the psychological and physical realities of singing (Clift & Hancox, 2001), but in this enquiry I am looking for a more fundamental description, and one which would place it clearly in the whole field of human endeavour, and of what it is to be human. In other words, we are here asking a philosophical question. Arguably, singing, alone amongst instruments, has a particular place in that context. The performer is themselves the instrument, and that instrument therefore has a unique connection to the psyche and the personality.

When we train singers, we encourage them to be truly present in their singing. We analyse the obstacles that they put in their own way, and we encourage them to be crystal clear about what they want to say and how they want to say it. And then they have to put that across to an audience, which means that, rather than being locked up in their own anxieties and habits, they have to liberate themselves to be able to “project” or give out to an audience, which may number several thousands. The use of a microphone may technically change this relationship, but it does not change the need to be clear and project and to be free to communicate. All this could be put another way and we could say that when we sing we seek to be free to respond to the music and our surroundings, and to be authentically present in the music we are making. Then it becomes an existential statement.

It seems to me that this is a fundamentally philosophical exercise, but that singers have avoided dealing with this, partly because philosophy has, in recent history, often been a somewhat esoteric academic discipline. (One of the refreshing things about the postmodernist’s insistence on philosophy as play, is that it debunks philosophy, and makes it wide open to anyone who wants to play the game!) However, if the issues we are dealing with are as fundamental as I have described above, we should maybe wrestle with them, and look for clarity rather than obscurantism.

In brief, it is proposed that singing is, first and foremost, a statement of who we are and of our existence in the world, that to do this it has to be authentic and that to be authentic we need to embrace a radical freedom which is ours by right. Part of our stance is that we can learn and train singers to appropriate this freedom and authenticity for themselves through some forms of the Alexander Technique.

Philosophy – A Way of Thinking Clearly?

What singing is not about

There is a rash of literature earnestly seeking to establish, by interviewing and collating responses from singers about their experiences, that singing makes people happier and/or promotes social solidarity and cohesiveness. This may be true but (Phillips, 2010),¹ from the point of view of the above analysis, it is beside the point. I would argue that singing is an expression of the reality of our existence, with all its conflicts and contradictions and unacceptable bits.

As such, its importance is much more fundamental than the advocates described above would imply. We need a more profound approach which accepts that singing is an expression of ourselves, which does not need to be sanitised or idealised but simply is. It is my experience that great singers in any genre understand this, and that it is also possible at quite an unpretentious level to have this simplicity and directness. This is not to say that musical literacy and technical mastery are not important, but that they serve another end, that of clearing away the obstacles to simply saying what is.

Heidegger

Ever since humans started to “grow up” and take responsibility for thinking clearly about themselves and their world, as opposed to relying on “given” thoughts and truths from divine and other sources, seedling existentialist ideas have been around forming part of the discussion. This was already happening in the time of the Greek philosophers before Christ, and Heidegger, one of the pioneers of modern existentialist thinking, referred back to this and made it clear he was re-establishing an ancient wisdom, rather than inventing a new one. “The most radical rationalism, philosophically determined to force a way back to an absolute beginning (Blackham, 1961, p. 86).”

Martin Heidegger was born in 1889 and died in 1976. Blackham formulates Heidegger’s concerns thus: “What is Being?” “What is what is?” This is “one of the developments of Husserl’s school of pure phenomenology,” which was “interested in the world of experience rather than the experienced world.” But Heidegger (and the existentialists), in contrast to Husserl, “use his method of discerning and describing basic structures, but with their attention turned back to the world, including the self in the world.” This is to say, “Heidegger, (as distinct from Husserl) brought back the everyday world into consideration as the realm of beings, or existence.” This is in strong contrast to abstract rationalist view derived from Descartes, in which the rational is the real, and the laws of nature ultimately more important than nature.

Heidegger’s main systematic work is *Sein und Zeit* (Being and Time) published in 1927, which aimed at building a metaphysic of Being. In order to “uncover the structure of human existence,” “human reality cannot be defined because it is not something given, it is in question.” “A Man is possibility, he has the power to be.” It is this openness of possibility which singing can help us to explore.

So Heidegger saw himself as rediscovering the ancient Greek idea of Being (before Plato) and reversing the disastrous trend of Western philosophy since Plato. Nihilism, he said, was the only philosophy left for a metaphysical ambition that had come to grief, but this can be overcome with a true insight into the true meaning of what it is to be (Campbell & Christensen, p. 243).

The present age, according to him, “is pragmatic and instrumental, one where (technology) is charged with ensuring that the outcome of every action is favourable to existence (Lechte, 2008, p. 29).” But “science does not think: it objectifies . . . a search for facts cannot do justice to the illumination of being (Lechte, 2008, p. 28).” In contrast to this instrumentalism, Heidegger suggests “truth as the coming into unconcealment of Being, the bringing forth of something from obscurity into the clearing of illumination (Lechte, 2008, p. 30).”

He talked about this “unconcealing” of Being as a function of art. Thus “the nature of poetry is the founding of truth (Heidegger, 1936).” Poetry thus reveals language as “the entity which brings being into unconcealment” and is also bound up with poetry as song (Lechte, 2008, p. 31).

Non-western existentialism

“Nothingness” in other traditions can be regarded as something to be sought rather than avoided in other cultures, of course. For example, Zen Buddhist traditions, which do not use writing to express fundamental human truth (that is, religion and ethics), have light to throw on this. Torataro Shimomura, in a contribution to an assessment of the influence of DT Suzuki (Abe, 1986), talks about the idea of Nothingness as being the contribution of Eastern philosophy to the history of thought: “In such thought of Nothingness, all concepts, language and logic are ultimately denied.” In such a situation, might not singing have a particular place as a way of communication which transcends words and music? Maybe singing is closer to our being than argument or writing can ever be.

Postmodernism

Some of the themes of Heidegger and Hegel were taken up and developed by the postmodernists. In some cases, by taking seedling ideas from existentialist thought and taking them to extremes, these developments revealed underlying weaknesses. Resisting homogeneity, for example, may be intellectually satisfying, but it makes ordinary pragmatic decision-making almost impossible. The search for coherence is not a childish search for comfort, but a necessary precondition for effective action in our lives. But living with reality in a continuous state of uncertainty and question can also be a liberation. And, importantly for this enquiry, it is a fertile breeding ground for artistic expression.

Postmodernism is characterised by:

- **Ironic play** with styles, citations, and narrative levels (Hutcheon, 1988)
- **A metaphysical scepticism** or nihilism towards the “grand narratives” of western culture (Lyotard, 1984)
- **A preference for the virtual at the expense of the real** (Baudrillard), which speaks of a “waning of affect (Jameson, 2009)” in the subject “who is caught up in the free interplay of virtual, endlessly reproducible signs inducing a state of consciousness similar to schizophrenia (Lynskey, 2010)”²

The work of possibly the most prominent postmodern thinker, Jacques Derrida, gives us an idea of the sort of thinking that this might involve. In his book on Jacques Derrida, Norris (1987) refers to Derrida’s Jewishness, and his sense of belonging to a marginal, dispossessed culture, “which influences take the form of a relentless interrogation of philosophy by one who . . . shares rather few of philosophy’s beliefs.” Derrida coined a new word “différance,” “in order to suggest how meaning is at once differential and deferred the product of a restless play within language that cannot be fixed or pinned down for the purposes of conceptual definition.” It “marks the point of encounter between Husserlian phenomenology (the dream of self-present, intelligible meaning) and a radically structuralised account of the sign which challenges Husserl’s most basic premises (Derrida, p. 15, 1973).”

Derrida used the term “deconstruction” with which he seeks to resist the homogenising pressure of received ideas (Norris, 1987, p. 184).” He later moved towards what Norris calls “applied deconstruction” for example in his involvement in Groupe de Recherches sur l’enseignement Philosophique (GREPH) in “an effort to demystify philosophy,” “to show how

it has developed in a complex relation to official (state sponsored) discourse. But it is also a defence of philosophical teaching.” In *La Carte Postale*, Derrida (1980) employs the postcard as a tactical resource against the tyranny of concepts. He is drawn to “Oxford philosophy” for its attachment to ordinary language as a means of debunking such large metaphysical pretensions.

Post postmodernism

Postmodernism has now been around for many years, and has generated a fair amount of impatience in academic circles. There have been responses to this known as post-postmodernism some of which seem to be simply a retreat back into nineteenth century romanticism. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore this thinking.

There are also contemporary thinkers such as the philosopher and historian Theodore Zeldin who live in a postmodern world but can see a way forward for humanity. In Zeldin’s (1995) case, he is currently exploring the importance of conversation and relationships at work, with the theme of exploring the small area of freedom which we do have – the windows of opportunity between the givens of our existence. As I explain below, I would maintain that a very significant way of expanding our area of freedom is through the Interactive Alexander Technique.

The Alexander Technique

Derrida was determined to resist the “homogenising pressure of received ideas” and “the tyranny of concepts,” but nevertheless attached himself to educational projects and the use of ordinary language for talking about philosophy. It is precisely this approach of taking a radically new look at what seems to be familiar territory, which is the core of some forms of the Alexander Technique and which has been so revolutionary in the lives of the singers we have worked with. A restless play within language that cannot be fixed or pinned down for the purposes of conceptual definition (the definition of “différance” above) is possibly a very good description of singing – a play between words and music, which eludes any precise definition, and yet is more than the sum of its parts.

I have given above two possible descriptions of singing, which may or may not be able to exist together. One is the role of art as being coming into unconcealment, after Heidegger, and the other is this postmodern description as a restless play within language. Our way of exploring this dilemma is to explore what happens in a specific context, when singers are invited to put aside preconceptions and work on being solely and simply present. In working with the Alexander Technique, there is the possibility of training singers to respond precisely and clearly to the “conditions present” and to minimise distraction and complication from old habits and ideas.

The Alexander Technique is practised, of course, by various organisations, and is regulated on a voluntary basis in the UK by the Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (cnhc). There are several groups claiming to have the “real” message of its founder, FM Alexander, I originally collaborated with practitioners of the Interactive Teaching Method of the Alexander Technique, characterised by group work as a tool for teaching, (used in very different ways by different practitioners, in my experience) and, in the words of one senior teacher, a radically student-centred approach. I remain convinced that their particular focus on Alexander’s work is a brilliant illumination of existentialist aspects of the technique.³ But, like many other alternative therapies, it includes all sorts of anti-intellectual elements and some of these can have serious

ethical implications. However, Alexander Technique International, based in Massachusetts, USA, exists specifically to promote debate and to provide a framework for ethical regulation.

The Alexander Technique and singing

The Alexander Technique is a standard provision in many music training organisations, and has been for some time. But some modern forms of the Alexander Technique are explicitly educative (as opposed to therapeutic) and particularly appropriate for singers. In any case, the technique was developed by FM Alexander to deal with vocal difficulties in the first place. The results we have seen of collaborating with Alexander teachers with this educative approach in singing training have been extraordinary, not only in individual development, but also in terms of group dynamics. For example, a group of young teenage girls have worked with the technique for six months, with an adult group. They have grown immeasurably in vocal poise, technical maturity, and wisdom in their personal dealings. Some of the things they say are: "It's like seeing the world for the first time" and "It's all about being (personal communication)." A teenager who has always tipped her head back when she sings in some kind of imitation of commercial role models, begins to monitor herself and check this habit, and becomes very much more effective on stage as a result.

As a further refinement of this contextual approach, we have had the opportunity to work with a group of men with an autistic spectrum disorder in residential care. It is popularly said about autism, "People with autism don't change. They learn new behaviours." and this has been a useful insight in the 15 years I have worked with these people and their carers.⁴ But in the case of this work, their physical, emotional, and verbal changes have been enormous, and their singing has become more accurate, controlled, and cooperative. The changes we have seen have been a source of joy and incredulity to all who know them. They are more themselves and their singing represents more who they are. This has also been the subject of a DVD film of their work and a study of its impact.

The insights gained from this work, as well as having implications for the welfare of others with a similar condition, are relevant to all of us. If they can reach out and take their freedom in both hands, with all their potential difficulties, so can, and so should, we. Where they lead, we can follow!

This work with Interactive Alexander Technique is, therefore, a link between philosophical ideas and our present concrete reality, in relation to what happens when we sing. It makes a bond with our listeners on the basis of our shared humanity, and this activity overcomes human divisions in a way that other instruments, external to the human body, cannot.

The Meaning of Singing for Us

A singer (in any genre) is successful insofar as they are able to be free and available to the music and to their listeners in that instant when they sing. They must, of course, be prepared, technically and musically, but the end result, if it works, will be of a different order from these essential constituent elements. This is evident, I would suggest, to most dedicated listeners, but easily obscured for performers by commercial and institutional demands. To insist on this authenticity also puts the emphasis back where it belongs, on the attentive listener who may not necessarily have technical knowledge. Some vague understanding of this is no doubt behind the burgeoning of televised singing competitions influenced by viewer opinion. The trouble is that the emphasis in these cases is usually on past commercial success, which is essentially

reactionary. What is successful today is unlikely to be so tomorrow. As a model for training singers, it is fundamentally flawed. We can only give them the tools to respond to the conditions that they will meet. We cannot, nor should we try to prejudge what those will be, nor how the present generation of student singers will respond to them. So we need another benchmark to measure success, which, I maintain, should be existential authenticity, a radical mode of being present to the music and the audience, which is evident to any who are paying real attention. We cannot ask for more.

Endnotes

- 1 The idea of happiness is, in any case, problematical and possibly not even desirable in some contexts. The psychoanalyst Adam Phillips points out that the word happiness is made to “do the work of moral imagination” and suggests that humans (and particularly children, with whom he is professionally involved) have a right to be challenged rather than to be happy.
- 2 One example recently in *the Guardian* was an article about an R&B singer, Janelle Monáe quoting a sleeve note: “from the chancellor of the Palace of the Dogs Asylum, explain that Monáe is an inmate who claims to be a time traveller from 2719, and whose stolen DNA has been used to clone an android freedom fighter called Cindi Mayweather.” An entertaining example of ironic play and nihilism towards the western grand narratives. Circumventing western grand narratives and inventing new narratives will be particularly relevant to groups historically excluded from high culture, of course.
- 3 Although many of its practitioners and its founder have been very hostile to this idea, preferring instead a reliance on popular “self-help” literature (Set works on their training course include Dale Carnegie’s “How to make friends and influence people” and Robert T. Kyosaki’s “If you want to be rich and happy, don’t go to school”).
- 4 This is a very clear exposition of the thinking of people with an autistic spectrum disorder in relation to the rest of the community.

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