

How do we frame singing education and culture?

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Abstract

Cognitive linguist, George Lakoff, in the run-up to the 2004 USA election, wrote a heartfelt plea to progressives to own the “frame”. In an earlier publication, he discussed the metaphor of political discourse. He distinguished between the “strict father” ideology of the political right and the “nurturant parent” narrative of the left. Although we might feel that it is not appropriate to play the child to any politician’s parent, nevertheless, the importance of this analysis has been enormously influential. It pointed to a recurring problem in any political or social discourse, namely, that of control of the narrative in which the issues are described.

Lakoff provides many examples of the ways in which the USA right controls the narrative and defines the terms in which the left must compete in order to win the argument (at times, with devastating effect). My suggestion here is that the terms used to describe and discuss singing are also potentially equally contentious and subject to distortion. Statements identifying music and singing as assets or frills can be unhelpful to singing cultures and professions. On the other hand, we hear from many musicians who reject these narratives and assert that their music-making is an inherent part of who they are.

Two frames about which we should have a discussion are those of wellness and the commodification of singing and music in general. Both frames contribute to the making of meaning and the impact of singing in our lives. I would suggest, however, that neither frame is sufficient in itself to describe the value and importance of singing and music.

There is a crisis in classical music and singing, in my recent experience. Concert halls are often half empty, and occupied largely by the elderly and sometimes cross. Educational programmes run as adjuncts to large musical organisations are often too little, too late and sometimes barely tolerated, let alone celebrated, by players and administrators, who appear to regard them as an irritating diversion from the real work in hand, necessary in order to obtain increasingly grudging funding (in the UK) from the public sector.

Children are almost absent from the classical music scene, except in programmes written, apparently, in the belief that they, and the rest of the opera-going public, are unable and unwilling to listen to anything based on musically sophisticated language, or – God forbid – “modern classical music”. When young people are involved in sophisticated music-making, there is often a frightening lack of engagement. I have seen teenagers singing as a side-effect to a local, extremely able and innovative choir, who all look exactly the same (quite a feat in a city such as Birmingham which is more than 50% BME) and look bored out of their minds. It was as though someone had gone and co-opted the 15 -year-olds from some local posh school, homogenised them, and then stuck them in front of an audience.

I fell in love with classical music from an extremely unlikely background, as a farmer’s daughter in the middle of the country. I am horrified that the young people whom I deal with are having to deal with the results of the confusion described in the paragraph above, and that their understanding of the art form which I love is being compromised in this way.

I want to suggest that under this strange dislocation of narratives and practice – of arts organisations who want – and need for funding purposes – to appear accessible and inclusive, but do not invest enough clear thinking into

this process, there lies a very fundamental confusion of “frames” or ways of describing what we do as singers and musicians. I have characterised this as an opposition between a utilitarian and an existentialist view. Both models have their possibilities and their limitations. But a discussion which moves the discussion on from the merely exploitative discourse dominated by commercially dominated interests will, I suggest, help to achieve clarity.

Philosophy is often regarded as irrelevant to ordinary life, with good reason, since academic philosophy may be couched in very obscure language. But, in a case such as that described above, philosophical clarity may be crucial to our quality of life and art. Specifically, we need to be clear that art – and in this case singing – is an essential expression of the self. It is crucial for self-worth and confidence, but this does not mean that it can be shoe-horned into a utilitarian view of the world (see below). Of course, the opposing existentialist view (also described below) arises directly from the romantic movement, described as:

“A movement in the arts and literature which originated in the late 18th century, emphasizing inspiration, subjectivity, and the primacy of the individual. Often contrasted with classicism.”



*Figure 1* Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, 1818

The romantic idea of man (usually!) as surging forth and dominating the world by means of his intellectual and artistic powers seems old-fashioned in this age of heightened awareness of ecological and diversity issues. But we need to – even must – find a way of affirming the agency of the individual and her/his community, and hence his/her right to self-expression through singing and – more generally – through music of as much sophistication as is necessary.

There is a widespread understanding that music, and particularly singing, are important to us as human beings. Consider, for example, this review of *Performing Rites* by Simon Frith: “we talk about music because we value music. And why do we value music? Because music – largely, though not exclusively through our talking about it – allows us to express who we think we are or want to be, while at the same time – since we know talk is finally inadequate to the music we try to talk about – it also leaves open those very same expressions of self and identity. We talk about music because such talk says who we are” (Knight, 1998, pp. 485-487).

But our understanding and experience of music is all too easily couched in terms which make it vulnerable to exploitation or misunderstanding – or both! That is to say, if we are not clear about our ideological and linguistic “frame” we leave our musical heritage open to appropriation by the thoughtless and the opportunists! Or, at the very least, we end up in a huge muddle!

Lakoff and Johnson (2004) make an urgent and compelling case for understanding and taking control of the way we frame our activities – particularly, in their case, political ideas and activities. In *Don't think of an elephant*, Lakoff (2004) gives striking examples of the way in which republicans in US politics use the frames of the left and control the dialogue in this way.

Lakoff talks about the use of the child metaphor in US politics and contrasts the “strict parent” frame of the US Republicans (George W Bush, for example) with the “nurturant parent” language of the left (pp. 11-12). This reflects the view expressed in an earlier book

that – “human morality is ultimately based on some form of the family and family morality” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 317).

This may not be a view which other cultures, with a different family structure, share, of course. And any of us might hold the view that the point of families is for children to grow up and make independent moral decisions of their own! For Lakoff and Johnson, this is part of the nurturant parent pattern.

I would suggest that the independence of a human being belongs to that person alone and, while enabled of course by nurturing care, is essentially independent of that. And this, in my terms, is an existentialist phenomenon. (Whatever arguments one may have about the psycho-social/economic conditions in which such independence may be formed) That is to say, that any person is responsible in the present for their presence in the world and its meaning (or lack of meaning). In terms of the present discussion, this presence is their vocal presence – the impact and statement of who they are conveyed by their singing voice.

Nevertheless, Lakoff’s (2012) analysis of the way our frames or the metaphors we use crucially affect our philosophical point of view, and the way we are heard by the rest of the world, is crucial. And even more important is his exposition of the way in which this can be distorted if it is manipulated in the service of other ideologies. His watchword (and the subtitle of his book) is: “Know your values and frame the debate”.

He ends with these guidelines:

“Show respect

Respond by reframing

Think and talk at the level of values

Say what you believe” (p. 119).

I want to suggest that taking control of the frame of the dialogue in this way is crucial for our ongoing integrity as a singing community, and that we can very easily find ourselves being re-defined in terms of other agendas unless we are aware of this.

### **A case study**

Consider, for example, this abbreviated extract from an article in *The Telegraph*:

“Singing in a choir can boost your mental health, a new study has found.

Researchers carried out an online survey of 375 people who sang in choirs, sang alone, or played team sports. Compared with the way sports players regarded their teams, choral singers also viewed their choirs as more coherent or ‘meaningful’. Nick Stewart, from Oxford Brookes University, who led the study, said: “Research has already suggested that joining a choir could be a cost-effective way to improve people's well-being. These findings suggest that feeling part of a cohesive social group can add to the experience of using your voice to make music.”

While the feel-good effects of singing have long been recognised, there is growing evidence that it can have a positive impact on a range of physical and psychological conditions, leading to campaigns for singing on prescription. In previous studies experts claimed that joining a choir could improve symptoms of Parkinson’s, depression and lung disease. Swedish research has suggested that it not only increases oxygen levels in the blood but triggers the release of ‘happy’ hormones such as oxytocin, which is thought to help lower stress levels and blood pressure. A year-long study on people with mental health problems,

carried out by the Sidney De Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health, Canterbury, has also shown the some 60 per cent of participants had less mental distress when retested a year after joining, with some people no longer fulfilling diagnostic criteria for clinical depression” (*The Telegraph*, 2013).

This is interesting for several assumptions that it makes. Because it does not address the issue of underlying concepts or “frames”, it is relying on taken-for-granted underlying philosophical and social assumptions which may not hold good for the readers. Partly this will depend on the community addressed for this purpose (e.g.: science researchers, choir singers, opera professionals). But the values and the boundaries of this community should at least be made explicit?

A sample of 375 might be considered fairly small in scientific terms. But this was a paper for the British Psychological Society conference in 2013 by a recent MSc graduate from Oxford Brookes, not a national study. So it is important to keep these reservations in context. But it is interesting to note that what is a fairly restricted study is portrayed in the national press as changing our perceptions of the meaning and place of singing in our society.

But, more fundamentally, it makes the assumption that singing is a means to achieve a goal (health or wellbeing) rather than something which is an end in itself. We might want to consider an alternative model of singing as a fundamental aspect of who we are and of our right, as human beings, to be heard. The benefits above would still apply, of course. But they would be “framed” very differently, as an essential part of being human, rather than a medical add-on to make us feel better.



Katrina Forrester (2015), in a review in *The London Review of Books* of William Davies' book *The Happiness Industry*, refers to his explicit identification of the happiness industry with the utilitarian philosophy (described below) of Jeremy Bentham. No doubt utilitarianism was a useful grounding of “empty philosophical notions – rights, obligation, duty” (p. 31).

But, in the context of singing education and activity, it is, I would suggest, woefully inadequate, and based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the place of music and singing in our lives. We might find it more useful to describe singing in terms of open-ended development and even self-transcendence – without any easy definitions of the end result of that development.

In one of my long-standing projects with adults in residential care who have autism, I have found this to be overwhelmingly the case. To do systematic research involving adults in this situation has proved to be impossible, for bureaucratic reasons. But we have seen an emphatic endorsement by these adults of their personalities and intellectual abilities through the medium of singing and performance, through semi-public performances of staged works and regular singing sessions which they embrace with intelligence and commitment. This is not something which is added on to their lives, but is fundamental for all who take part in these groups – carers, service-users, volunteers and teachers. Organizational management can be terrifyingly unaware of this.

One off-site residential care manager said, on the issue of the right of the service-users to be heard by the outside world: “All I (sic) want is for them to have a nice time”. This drastically

missed the point of what they are doing, and falls neatly into the utilitarian trap described above.

In the context of singing education and culture, this problem is urgent. If we are not clear why we do what we do, the agenda will be hijacked by those with a simply economic and exploitative interest in the possibilities of our art form, or by those with manipulative agendas such as describing singing as a means to extra benefits which may not be part of the “frame” to which we wish to subscribe.

I am going to contrast two intellectual frames here as an exercise in this clarity. The first is utilitarianism, of which a contemporary analysis is referred to above. The other, which, in my submission, meets more of the need for conceptual clarity, but which still leaves gaps which need to be filled, is existential thought, originating with the tradition of Kirkegaard and Sartre, and others, but necessarily redefined in our time. This binary analysis does not cover all the possibilities, of course. But I hope that contrasting these two frames will help to develop the conceptual rigour which we urgently need.

### **Utilitarianism**

Utilitarianism can be defined as:

“The doctrine that an action is right in so far as it promotes happiness, and that the greatest happiness of the greatest number should be the guiding principle of conduct”

([www.oxforddictionaries.com](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com), *n.d.*).

This is often taken as self-evident, of course, in the press and in popular discourse. A further analysis makes some crucial distinctions between the utilitarian frame and other

philosophical standpoints:

“a tradition stemming from the late 18th- and 19th-century English philosophers and economists Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill (stating) that an action is right if it tends to promote happiness and wrong if it tends to produce the reverse of happiness—not just the happiness of the performer of the action but also that of everyone affected by it. Such a theory is in opposition to egoism, the view that a person should pursue his own self-interest, even at the expense of others, and to any ethical theory that regards some acts or types of acts as right or wrong independently of their consequences. Utilitarianism also differs from ethical theories that make the rightness or wrongness of an act dependent upon the motive of the agent” ([www.utilitarianism.com](http://www.utilitarianism.com), *n.d.*).

I would suggest that utilitarianism is the default philosophical position of most dialogue about music and singing. It is a fundamental assumption of the above report on the benefits of choral singing, for example. When we want to judge an artistic project, particularly at a popular or a general level, we argue for its benefits, and the project which has the most measurable benefits is judged to be better and in some cases, more worthy of financial support. There are, of course, interesting reasons for the generalised success of this model. It appears to promote benefits for all, independently of personal and structural prejudices. And the alternative existential model below, based on romanticism, as an expression of the romantic vision of man as surging through the earth as a creative force, could well give rise to egoism. We see the limitations involved in this every time there is some over-hyped report of a musician or singer in the media. But a deeper reading of the material on some “celebrities” may give a rather different picture. I give two examples below from the classical music arena (Daniel Barenboim and Claudio Abbado).

**Modern utilitarianism**

Interestingly, utilitarianism has some very modern proponents. Amia Srinivasan (2015) discusses a project of William McAskill, a 28-year-old lecturer at Oxford who is running a very thorough, modern philanthropic project on utilitarian lines – which he calls “effective altruism” built on the claim that we should do the most good we can, to be measured in ‘Qalys’ – quality adjusted life years (p. 3). Srinivasan (2015) observes: “Qaly thinking frees us from considering the specificity of those whom we are helping: marginal and counterfactual thinking frees us from the specificity of ourselves” (p. 5).

But she further observes: “McAskill seems to think that there is no moral calculation that can’t be made to fit on the back of his envelope; any uncertainty we might have about precise values or probabilities can be priced into the model ... but the more uncertain the figures, the less useful the calculation, and the more we end up relying on a commonsense understanding of what’s worth doing” (p. 5). And it is precisely this common sense understanding of music culture which leads to some of the problems described above.

Srinivasan continues: “The tacit assumption is that the individual ... is the proper object of moral theorising ... if everything comes down to the marginal individual, then our ethical ambitions can be safely circumscribed; the philosopher is freed from the burden of trying to understand the mess we’re in, or of proposing an alternate vision of how things could be. You wouldn’t be blamed for hoping that philosophy has more to give” (p. 6).

And you wouldn’t be blamed for suggesting that music and singing have more to give! For singing especially, I would suggest, the specificity of the person – the performer – is crucial.

For singers, the instrument itself is specific to the person. So we need a frame which celebrates that specificity – the physical groundedness – of the human voice. And for this, I would suggest, we need at least an existential element in our “frame”.

Here is Jean-Paul Sartre (1946), one of the architects of western existentialism and interesting to us because he engages with art as an expression of our existence: “Existentialists ... believe that existence comes before essence ... or, if you will, that we must begin from the subjective” (p. 27).

Sartre continues: “Man is all the time outside of himself: it is in projecting and losing himself beyond himself that he makes man to exist; and, on the other hand, it is by pursuing transcendent aims that he himself is able to exist. Since man is thus self-surpassing, and can grasp objects only in relation to his self-surpassing, he is himself the heart and center of his transcendence. There is no other universe except the human universe, the universe of human subjectivity. This relation of transcendence as constitutive of man” (p. 66).

Sartre was very concerned – in this lecture and elsewhere – to refute religious ideology as an opposing frame to existentialist thought. The existence of other universes is very much a current developing scientific debate in our time, of course. But the idea of human existence as self-surpassing – and of singing as an expression of that – remains.

Lakoff and Johnson (1999) are dismissive of existentialist ethics, concluding that:

“Existentialism might be seen as an instance of the rebellious child rejecting the parent altogether and finding his or her own way in the world” (p. 324). And it is true that existentialism is a necessary outcome of the romantic cult of the individual, as referred to

above and as is set out with marvelous clarity by Isaiah Berlin (2000) in his series of lectures, *The roots of romanticism*.

Lakoff and Johnson (1999) deal with utilitarianism in similar terms to their dismissal of existentialism: “the individual is not the bottom line in society. The principle of utility might sound like an absolute command of a Strict Father (Reason) but it is also realized by us via our basic empathy and feelings for the happiness of others” (p. 322).

The trouble is that empathy is not universal, and so cannot be used as the basis of any universal ethical framework. People with an autistic spectrum disorder, for example, lack the ability to empathise, to a greater or less degree as meticulously set out by Simon Baron Cohen in *The essential difference*. This does not mean that they are unethical!

But the reservation about existential thinking – that it gives insufficient attention to the social and personal framework of the existential agent – is, I think justified to some extent, but can be overcome. The individual can still take radical, personal responsibility for her/his actions in a social and historical context. Indeed, the only possibility of human existence is within such a context. Even a decision to withdraw from community would still be defined by its existence. And a crucial possible context for this communal statement of individual existence is in the expression of communality through singing.

There are two wonderful examples of this musical existentialism. Both are in the field of orchestral rather than vocal music, but they are so eloquent that it is worth making the effort to connect with them.

The first is Daniel Barenboim's (2015) Edward Said lecture delivered in May 2015. The fact that his words are an expression of music of the highest quality honed in an arena of war and hatred gives it, of course an added urgency and authority: "I deeply believe in the greater importance of music and in its ability to influence and shape who we are as human beings. And, further: "but we have to lay the foundation now for a system in which music forms part of the basic education of every child and teenager rather than being just an exotic subject for a few children."

The second example, again from the realm of orchestral music, is Tom Service's (2014) obituary of Claudio Abbado in *The Guardian*: "Abbado's concerts with his Lucerne Festival Orchestra weren't mere performances of pieces of music, they were searing, transformative existential journeys. His death is a huge loss.

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"But there was another, deeper kind of listening that Abbado wanted to create, and that was to catalyse his musicians and his audiences to listen, to have contact with the musical substance not merely of the sounds the orchestra makes, but with the silence that comes before and after the music. That sounds ludicrous, paradoxical for a concert of orchestral music, which is all about the sounds, after all! But with those musicians in Lucerne, Abbado was able to lift the veil on some other realm of experience, to put us in touch with a larger mystery even than the notes the orchestra was playing."

And, leaving aside any metaphysical implications in the above, exploring this possibility in music and, specifically in singing, I would suggest, is the root – the basis – for the human communal framework for singing and music which Lakoff and Johnson find to be missing in existential ethics.





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