

## Singing in the Twenty-first Century...Singing a Better World

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### The Ancient and the Modern

In his writings on Mahatma Gandhi, Merton (1964) tells us that neither the ancient wisdoms nor the modern sciences are complete in themselves. They do not stand alone; they call for one another. From modern singing practices inherited from nineteenth century European classical traditions, I call on the ancient wisdoms of Canada's indigenous People of the Pacific Northwest. Found on a rattle fragment, this vision song was sung to a woman when she was sick. She then used it to heal others.

In your throat is a living song  
A living spirit song  
Her name is Long-Life Maker

Yes I'm here to heal  
With the healing ways  
Of the Magic-of-the-Ground  
The Magic-of-the-Earth

So go on poor friend  
And sing with the healing spirit  
With the Magic-of-the-Ground  
The Magic-of-the-Earth

And you will spring to life  
Through the power of the words  
Through the Magic-of-the-Ground  
The Magic-of-the-Earth<sup>1</sup>

### Cross-Cultural Reflections

Amongst indigenous cultures I have known, including the Sami of Scandinavia, the Aborigines of Australia, and the First Nations of the Americas, singing is used

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therapeutically as a form of medicine and healing to remedy emotional and physical illness. Holy men and women, sound healers, and indigenous healers throughout the world practice singing to affect human consciousness and improve health. For indigenous healers or shamans, the concept of tonal aesthetic does not exist. Sustaining life is what counts.

Cross-cultural descriptions of singing from a variety of different traditions provide us with a rich palette of contrasting perspectives. From these human traditions and practices we can examine singing and vocal performance for music education and everyday life.

What is the value of learning to sing in the world today? Is the value of singing aesthetic experience, social identity, physical health, psychological well-being, or spiritual enlightenment? Is singing a demonstration of artistry or musicianship, is singing the formation of consciousness, or is it a manifestation of the soul?

As performers, teachers, and healthcare professionals continue to investigate the power of singing in relation to the wholeness of the body, mind, and spirit, these questions can serve and guide us toward a future of alternative theories and practices associated with singing and voice education in the twenty-first century.

### **Generosity, Growth, and Transformation**

Before I offer you this miniature portrait of singing, I would like to begin my presentation with the practice of the paramitas, what Mahayana Buddhists call the Six Perfections: The first of these six perfect realizations is known as *dana paramita* the ancient Sanskrit term for generosity, or giving with love. I offer our *dana paramita* to Ki Adams, Andrea Rose, Susan Knight, and Douglas Dunsmore, the four Founding Directors of Festival 500. I remember very well how diligently and wisely Susan, Ki, and Douglas worked to grow the 1997 inaugural Festival, and I will never forget the joyful privilege that was mine in conducting the Festival 500's first Massed Youth Choir.

### **A Singer's Story**

As Festival 500 has grown and transformed, so too has my professional practice in voice education and choral music. My transforming journey began with learning to breathe again. It must sound ridiculous for a middle-aged conductor and teacher of singing to say that she started over in 1997 by learning to breathe, but that is exactly

what happened. Healing from a difficult year of depression, I agreed to join my South African friend on the remote Vancouver Island of Cortez to study with Zen teacher, anthropologist and wilderness guide Roshi Joan Halifax (1982, 1993), author of two wonderful books, *The Fruitful Darkness: Reconnecting the Body to the Earth* and *Shaman: The Wounded Healer*.

With a suspect attitude worn so well by members of the academic community, I crossed my legs in a quietly uncomfortable sitting position and thought "this is not the kind of breathing singer's know." As I practiced throughout the week however, I realized that I really was learning to breathe again and I developed what Zen scholars call "not-knowing" or "beginner's mind."

Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh describes this form of conscious breathing as mindfulness, a way of being fully present in each breath, "When we breathe consciously we recover ourselves completely and encounter life in the present moment." The practice of conscious breathing teaches us to calm the body and the mind, recognize where we are and whom we are with, concentrate fully, and understand things more deeply. With conscious breathing you can *feel* the focus; you can *hear* the quiet.

My interest in the psycho-spiritual aspects of singing started in the late 1980s with my doctoral research at Northwestern University. Before I learned to breathe again, and before I came to Canada, I completed my PhD studies in music education philosophy by crafting language that I could attach to years of intuitive practice. This work found its way into my 1993 choral textbook *We Will Sing!* and continues to distinguish the Choral Music Experience performance approach to music teaching and learning from the concept-based, elements of music methods traditionally used in general music teaching.

As a professional singer, conductor, and music teacher, I always believed that the value of musical experience was embodied in what the Greeks called *techne*, or musical "making and doing with skill and understanding." I also believed that singing in choirs should be more broadly understood in mainstream music education as a musically and educationally dynamic, inclusive and intelligent form of musical knowing and doing. This doctoral research demonstrated how the physical, spiritual, creative, and cognitive aspects of singing serve as a multidimensional, non-verbal form of procedural knowledge, or thinking-in-action.

After I learned to breathe again on Cortez Island and began to search for a way of understanding singing and voice education that reflected my social and spiritual values *beyond thinking*, I distanced myself from mainstream music education in order to

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explore indigenous culture, feminist theories, and the contemplative arts. During a six year period of research and writing, I studied and practiced my *beginner's mind*. In the desert of the southwestern United States, in the footsteps of the Buddha and on the Ganges River in India, and finally to the Himalayas of Bhutan, I observed the *big picture* and studied the many ways singing is used cross-culturally as medicine, as meditation, as relationship, as community, as war, as ecology and, as art.

This enriching work culminated in my recent textbook *Circle of Sound Voice Education: A Contemplative Approach to Singing Through Meditation, Movement and Vocalization*. (Boosey & Hawkes, 2005) Linking east and west, *Circle of Sound* introduces a contemplative approach to singing through a blending of Zen breathing meditation and taijiquan movement forms with Western bel canto vocalization. The newly developed exercises inspire a naturally organic and healthful approach to classroom, studio, and rehearsal pedagogy and connect the power of singing to the wholeness of body, mind, and spirit.

Introduced by Canadian scholar Wayne Bowman, the *Circle of Sound* contemplative approach to singing suggests what he calls

bold alternatives to traditional pedagogical practices, alternatives that treat music as a natural human fact, an essential way of being human, and a point of access to a dimension of human experience that is both unique and profoundly important to our individual and collective lives.

### Orpingalik Speaks

While we continue to search for new ways of inspiring students to sing, there is likely no better description of the relationship of breathing and singing than the one remembered in 1921 by Danish explorer Knud Rasmussen who transcribed the words of Orpingalik, a leader of the Netsilik, the People of the Seal. As Rasmussen (1932) explains,

He was always singing when he had nothing else to do, and he called his songs 'comrades in solitude,' or he would say that his songs were his breath, so necessary were they to him, to such an extent were they part and parcel of himself.

As Rasmussen accounts, from the well of his being, Orpingalik could draw up a song to meet every need, to lighten every burden. The great Inuit leader said,

How many songs I have I cannot tell you. I keep no count of such things. There are so many occasions in one's life when a joy or a sorrow is felt in such a way that the desire comes to sing; and so I only know that I have many songs. All my being is a song, and I sing as I draw breath.

Orpingalik's text can be heard in the skilful and beautiful multimovement cantata "Shaman Songs" written by Canadian composer Gary Kulesha (1990). Scored for clarinet, string quartet, and SATB choir, this work embodies the essence of singing as breath.

### **A Multidimensional Portrait of Singing**

From the 1960s through the 1980s, voice research proposes that singing is first an art and secondarily a science. The portrait that emerges from the last 25 years of research is one of an unconnected body of work that favours the biological and acoustical functions of the vocal mechanism over considerations of the psycho-spiritual dimensions of singing. Few studies in physiology, acoustics, function, or even psychology consider the voice holistically as a multidimensional phenomenon embodying its biological, emotional, and spiritual nature.

While early definitions of voice suggest both an *inner voice* (the voice of God or spirit) and an *outer voice* (the voice of reason), voice teaching in rehearsals and studios all too frequently focuses on the manipulation of the vocal apparatus in the production, control, and coordination of tone without much consideration for the psycho-spiritual, therapeutic, and social benefits found in cross-cultural perspectives uncovered in music, medicine, psychology, and anthropology.

Historically, the separation of the biological dimensions of singing from the psycho-spiritual dimensions of singing from the time of Descartes (who obviously never sang in a choir) contrasts significantly with Aristotle's classical view of singing in which the soul and the body constitute a single substance. Aristotle's thinking intuitively connects the organic, biological dimension of voice to its psycho-spiritual dimensions.

There is a growing abundance of new evidence to suggest the healing powers of singing in a choir. Briefly, musician-neuroscientist, Manfred Clynes (1978), a leader in

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the field of emotional responses to music, suggests that singing is a key to the promotion of health and well-being. The Mind and Life Institute in Boulder, Colorado is working with His Holiness the Dalai Lama to investigate the impact of conscious breathing and meditation on the thoughts and emotions of artists and educators.

University of Wisconsin-Madison neuroscientist, Richard Davidson (2001), has measured the effects of conscious breathing on a wide range of subjects. Along with physician, Jon Kabat-Zinn (1992), and many other scholars in the sciences, the contemplative and performing arts, these studies show that through short periods of breathing meditation, singers, among others, had reduced anxiety, improved immune systems, and increased activity in the area of the brain associated with positive emotions such as joy, enthusiasm, and good will.

Today's medical and musical research in cross-cultural sound healing offers fresh perspectives that logically and holistically embrace the mind-body-spirit nature of singing experience.

### **Singing as Knowing, Doing, and Being (Theoria, Praxis, Phronesis)**

So, how do singing teachers and choral music educators get from the theoretical constructs of *knowing about the voice*, the physiological, acoustical, and functional aspects of singing, to the contemporary if not dogmatic paraxial accounts of *musical making and doing* as yet another form knowing or thinking-in-action, to the emerging revelations of singing as social conscience, moral responsibility, and ethical discernment? The notion of ethical discernment is described by Bowman (2005) as an "ethical disposition upon which vocal performance rests." This concept of phronesis or ethical discernment suggests a moral course of action that is *right* and *just* in a given situation. It is a matter of doing the *right thing*, at the *right time*, with the *right intent*. It is a matter of character and as Aristotle observed, this approach is "not for every person, nor is it easy."

### **Foundations of Singing**

Introduced earlier in this paper, *Circle of Sound* is based on a dynamic model of singing as a form of personal awareness, as an act of mindfulness, as an exercise of deep listening, and as the experience of well-being. This is not to say that the traditional values of singing as musicianship, as the practice of skill and understanding and as a form of knowledge are absent from a contemplative approach to singing, or that the science of singing is not fundamental. We do suggest, however, that a multidimensional

view of singing that goes beyond thinking, beyond the command of vocal technique, and beyond the learning of notation should include the singer's ability to recognize her shared humanity with the world. This is a fundamental imperative for the twenty-first century.

Voice education in the twenty-first century must necessarily consider the kind of personal attention, emotional support, and care-giving that motivates our student's ethical discernment—the student's ability to embrace a moral course of action. It is more important than ever that teachers and conductors consider singing as a matter of character and service. As David Best (1992) argues, education in the arts has an utterly inescapable moral dimension.

#### **The four foundations: awareness**

What does the development of personal intelligence, ethical discernment, and moral responsibility have to do with singing? In our view, just about everything. *Circle of Sound* addresses singing as a form of awareness, clearly a life skill related to personal intelligence. Through conscious breathing, a simple and systematic series of breathing exercises that encourage the singer to follow her breath in and out for a period of three to eight minutes, the student's awareness of herself and others continually deepens.

#### **The four foundations: mindfulness**

The *Circle of Sound* contemplative approach to singing promotes singing as an act of mindfulness, the skilful means of being fully present in the here and the now. Mindfulness and ethical discernment are interdependent skills. Through the sequenced series of breathing, movement, and vocalization exercises, the students learn to bear witness to themselves and to others. They learn to slow down, to recognize where they are, to concentrate and to understand the meanings of what it is they are doing.

#### **The four foundations: deep listening**

A contemplative approach to singing teaches the skills of deep listening as a form of moral responsibility. As the students practice conscious breathing, they begin to hear the quiet, feel the calm, and sense the release of tension and anxiety in their bodies and minds. The ability to listen to others, to the ensemble, to hear their own parts in relation to other parts, and to make adjustments in pitch, tone quality, or dynamic levels

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requires the ability to listen deeply. The ability to listen is closely related to being free of fear and anxiety, being at ease and being in calm and concentration. Learning to listen to the self is the first step in learning to listen to others.

### **The four foundations: well-being**

*Circle of Sound* is the practice of well-being. In a world where violence and injustice surrounds us, it is not enough for our students to simply produce beautiful singing for its own sake. Too often our work takes place in the exclusive confines of our rehearsal rooms and concert halls that leave out most of the world. Yes, beautiful singing is essential in education and in life. But singing beautiful tones for their own sake is not enough to educate our student's social consciousness or sense of moral responsibility in the world today. Well-being comes from the quality of our connection with others—from the sense of shared humanness that comes from singing for the benefit of all beings.

### **Conclusions**

This contemplative approach to voice education as the inclusive education of personal intelligence, ethical discernment, and moral responsibility comes through the practice of singing as awareness, mindfulness, and deep listening. A young singer who recognizes herself as an important part of the world, who is at peace with her surroundings, who respects the multiple differences and the rights of all people to justice and freedom, and who demonstrates her service to the community through the joy and pleasure of singing counts in every way as an artist and as a peacemaker.

Today and everyday, we are blessed to celebrate the phenomenon of singing as a cross-cultural, transforming, and inclusive musical practice—a human practice inspired by diversity, a healing practice rooted in ancient history and a mindfulness practice for singing in the twenty-first century.

The man whose light has come on in this head...can never be kept down or defeated. We can re-dream this world and make the dream real. Human beings are gods hidden from themselves. Our hunger can change the world, make it better, sweeter...The heart is bigger than a mountain... There are dolphins, plants that dream, magic birds inside us. The sky is inside us. The earth is in

us...All roads lead to death, but some roads lead to things which can never be finished. Wonderful things (Okri, 1993).<sup>1</sup>

**Endnote**

1. This text was recently set for SATB choir by David Brunner in a piece entitled *A Living Song* (Boosey & Hawkes).