Integrated Training for the Singing Actor: Theory and Practice

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Abstract: In the current world of voice training, the physical, emotional and dramatic aspects of the singer's art are undergoing a thorough re-examination. Musicals, opera, performance art, "popera" – all are placing increasing, and increasingly varied, demands on the voice, body, mind, and spirit of the singing actor. In this context, how do teachers in both the classroom and the studio prepare young performers? Playfair and Portman address this question with commentary on both the theory and practice associated with their development of an innovative training program at the Brandon School of Music that systematically integrating movement, text study, and acting technique with vocal instruction.

Introduction

A singer is an artist, a musician, and an actor. To be successful in the highly competitive field of contemporary vocal performance, an individual must acquire techniques relevant to, and supportive of, effective practice in all three areas. It is becoming increasingly recognized throughout both the profession of vocal performance, and in training programs for that profession, that acquisition and development of those techniques must occur in an integrated fashion. What follows is a summary of what we have discovered in the process of developing a program of integrated training for the singing actor in the undergraduate voice program at the Brandon University School of Music.

The Singing Actor

We began with the basic principle of Wesley Balk, which is the idea of the two intersecting worlds of music and theatre. While there are musical skills and theatre skills required for the singing actor, there are also a whole set of skills unique and beyond those of either world.

These skills can be summed up in one word – integration, a process embedded into the concept of the “singing actor.”

While it has been in use for decades, often as the highest compliment to singers of the stage, the term “singing actor” is now becoming more widely recognized and accepted as the appropriate one to describe interpreters of vocal music in general. A few weeks ago, a colleague suggested that, since the Brandon University School of Music is exactly that, a school of music, we use the term “acting singer” instead. That, to us, didn’t make sense, because as far as we’re concerned *every* singer is an actor. Whether it is in art song, opera, new music or any other sort of repertoire in which a singer is involved, the work fits the definition of acting, albeit to varying degrees. For the purposes of our program, in both theory and practice, our definition is this: “The portrayal of a character’s moment by moment journey of transformation over the course of a dramatic narrative.” In other words, the singer is enacting a story.

What we have discovered in our work at Brandon University, and what we advocate in training the singing actor, is that grounding singers in the idea that they’re enacting a story serves as an anchor, a foundation upon which we build student’s voices and the way they use them.

Building the Voice

Building a voice requires the acquisition of the technical ability to create an intended sound. It also requires the acquisition of expressivity (the ability to shape phrases with musical gesture and dynamics), gained through understanding and clarity of intention in musicality. This, in turn, requires understanding of harmonic language and musical rhetoric. In addition, the voice must be trained to function in tune, pitch to pitch, vowel to vowel, and undisturbed by the articulation of consonants. There must also be audibility and understandability, with all the above functioning in relation to effective communication of story through the experiences of a character.

This particular premise of vocal training is supported by recent scientific research, which indicates that successful musicianship also requires incorporation of emotional connection to the material and skill at communicating and/or portraying that connection. In physiological terms, the nerve that innervates emotional responses also innervates the voice, making voices are hard-wired to connect sound with feeling. In this context, and in light of other recent research that shows that listeners electromagnetically receive vibration of sound with the brain stem and react emotionally to its quality prior to processing it through the ear and brain,² the necessity of the singer actually feeling what the character is and does takes on a whole new level of importance. If singers are not engaged in the textual and/or musical truth of the work they are interpreting, they send mixed messages about what both the text and the music indicate about the truth of a given moment.

Building the Actor

Truth in the moment is a fundamental component in acting, as suggested by the definition above. Skills that enable acting portrayals to become fully effective are grounded in similar considerations of moment-by-moment truth as musical training. These skills include a capacity for emotional freedom (having insight into, and the ability to embody, the infinite range of emotions undergone by characters in narrative), and a capacity to portray both the inner and outer realities of a character and his/her experiences without compromising vocal quality or physical well-being. Before any of these skills come into play, however, the singing actor must excavate both text and music for clues to emotion and truth, and their development over both the breadth of the narrative and the moment-by-moment experiences that define that narrative.

Excavating for Truth

In our model, students find the essence of a composition by memorizing the text, or at least knowing and understanding it very, very well, prior to any examination of the music. This is because the composer will have based his/her composition on the text and its meaning. We therefore train the student in examining textual elements like punctuation, imagery, word choice and phrasing, sentence structure and repetition for insight into character, relationship and situation.

Once the text and its meaning have been digested, the story and the trajectory of the character understood (at least to some degree), then the interpreter can begin to unearth what the music is communicating about that story, and how that communication is being undertaken—in other

words, the musical component of the narrative. Elements to be considered on the macrocosmic level include harmonic language (that interprets the story, creates mood and colours, and indicates general feeling), and other elements ranging from leitmotifs to sound painting. Then students study the microcosmic level of musical function, wherein music illustrates specific single events and / or particular moments through text setting. We look at length of phrase (i.e. the length of a thought or experience of feeling), metre, rhythm, the emotional resonances of a single word communicated through the quality of the consonant and vowel and their placement on pitch, and interval. These principles are universal, applicable to works by Mozart or Peter Maxwell-Davies, Puccini or John Beckwith.

All these techniques of excavation have a single purpose – to help the singing actor to understand how the work they’re studying *moves* ... specifically, its inner and outer movement.

Inner Movement

Every form of musical literature that contains an element of dramatic narrative (opera, musical, art song, song cycle), and that therefore requires acting as we have defined it follows the same pattern—an increasing intensity from first note to last that builds to a point of climax, release, and resolution. This is true on the macrocosmic level (i.e. from the beginning of the opera or musical to the end of the opera or musical), down through the act, the scene, and the aria / solo to, on the microcosmic level, an individual line or phrase. The same pattern repeats in art song, and even in the song cycle. Narrative does not stand still. Music, and drama, by their essential natures, *are movement*.

That movement manifests in four general ways:

- Emotional: what a character feels at the beginning of the work; what a character feels at the end of the work, and the steps along the way from A to B
- Transformational: who a character is at the beginning of the work (belief systems, values, sense of self, identity), who that character is at the end of the work; and the steps along the way from A to B.
- Experiential: what a character is *innocent* about at the beginning of a work, what a character is no longer innocent about at its end, and again, the steps along the way.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly in terms of the drama of a work, there is the fourth kind of movement:

- Intentional: what a character intends, his/her objective or goal at the beginning of a work; at the end, whether s/he has achieved it; and the obstacles, successes and disappointments s/he faces along the way.

A great deal could be said about the interaction between these four movements, because dramatic narrative is defined by such interaction, but that's a subject for another time. Ultimately, what we strive for, and what we advocate, is training students to define, for themselves, a sense of a work's inner movement upon which they can base their own, unique, engaged interpretation. An equally important component of both discovering and portraying that interpretation is *external* or *outer* movement.

Body as Instrument

As singing actors, our bodies are our instruments. Understanding our selves physically, psychologically and emotionally allows us insight into our selves both conceptually *and* experientially. How we move is who we are, and who we are (or who our character is) is how we/they move. In short, we simply can't underestimate the necessity of teaching the students the value and ways of moving in all possible ways. The whole self (not just the face, or the face and hands) must be engaged in the moment, in both voice production and emotional interpretation. Everything in the body must be coordinated to convey sound and meaning; meaning in the sound, and meaning through body language. This may seem obvious, but waking up a generation that has grown up in front of the television, the computer and video games to their physical capabilities can be challenging.

When we break the concept of movement for the singing actor into its component elements, we see that even a single aspect such as breathing enlists the whole body from the top of the head to the tips of the toes. To live we must breathe, to breathe we must move. Breath is, of course, the power source of the voice. If we're not plugged into the body, the sound is at best weak and ineffectual. Our alignment throughout the body, how we allow the spine to gather on inhalation, lengthen on exhalation, the freedom we find in our torsos to maximize the amount of air we take in and its management during voicing, the alignment of our support structure in the pelvis, legs, knees, ankles and feet—all create a profound influence on our sound and on our engagement in the moment.

Then there is the relationship between sound source and resonance, which go hand in hand. No matter what vocal aesthetic we wish to achieve, the resonators must support the pitch. The latest research demonstrates the interactive (non-linear) relationship between phonation and resonance. When the latter is in cooperation with the former, each is eased and the sound is greater for less effort. This is one manifestation of the principle that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Other manifestations include voice production (breath and engagement of intrinsic and extrinsic muscles of the larynx must move in order for the vocal folds to vibrate), articulation (our five moveable articulators—lips, tongue, jaw, palate and larynx—must be constantly adjusting), and volume (our bodies must be in constant motion to allow the breath motion to both respond to and shape the called for pitch and loudness). In short breath, phonation, resonance, articulation – the whole being must be engaged and integrated so that alignment, action and vocal utterance all function as one, becoming an integrated physical and musical gesture motivated by the character and his / her moment.

At a recent conference, a physiotherapist who was doing a clinic was heard stating that she was shocked to find out that singers did a vocal warm up, but often not a physical one. She commented that singers are athletes, vocal but also physical, and that if a singer was to perform at maximum peak and maintain a career of longevity, physical warm-up and fitness must be a priority.

Breaking Down the Study of Movement

While integration of instrument and self is the goal, the training process for singing actors often requires a breaking down of that integration into various elements. Coming to understand how the voice works requires an accurate picture of the physical instrument, how it operates and articulates, and what the elements are of that instrument (eg. breath, sound, resonance). We learn

how to play our instruments, yet they are ever-changing. What we had for breakfast, our biorhythms of the day, our home and family life, the multiple and sundry events that work on us daily, all affect the self and the body. We have to become accustomed to tuning into ourselves and often compensate for the varying states of being that we experience. Our students develop this awareness and accumulate these skill sets through the many movement techniques we apply in class and studio, each building on the other. These include Bodymapping, Alexander/Feldenkrais, Dalcroze Eurhythmics, Laban, Dance, Voice-Extension and Yoga.

- a) Bodymapping: Amy Likar describes bodymapping as “the conscious correcting and refining of one’s body map to produce efficient, graceful, coordinated, and effective movement. The body map is one’s self-representation in one’s own brain, one’s assumptions or conception of what one’s body is like, in whole or part. If our representation is accurate, movement is good. If our representation is faulty, movement suffers. When our map is corrected, the movement improves. Progress can be very rapid and a musician can, over time, learn to play like a natural.”³ Through an adequate and accurate awareness of our physical self-representation, our movement can become effective and safe. As singers recover the integrity of their body maps, the quality of their musical performance significantly improves. When correcting tension in a student, or helping them to find an efficient movement, correcting their body map of the parts that produce it must be accurate.⁴ As Heather Buchanan notes, “students will correct their body maps and develop and refine their movements if they engage in a conscious and aware state of being when they sing. Effective body awareness can be modeled and taught.”⁵
- b) Awareness through Movement: Feldenkrais/Alexander: Feldenkrais is a technique that builds freedom of movement and therefore enhances students’ ability for musical expression. It finds the safest and most direct, integrated means of any given moment, which allows students to avoid placing themselves at risk of injury. One of the primary advantages of Feldenkrais is that it directly correlates to the ideal of maximum efficiency. In other words, the greatest amount and quality of sound for the least amount of effort is what we strive for in singing. The same ideal is true for movement in Feldenkrais technique.
- c) Awareness Through Movement: Dalcroze Eurhythmics: This technique teaches the physical and emotional movement of musicality both rhythmically and melodically in space and time through breathing, gesture, physical attitudes, action, walking and other full body activities.

The result in a development of the understanding and acquisition of the innate musicality in movement.

- d) Laban: Laban movement technique analyzes movement according to three basic criteria—speed, direction, and weight. Physical exploration of those criteria, and how they interact, not only introduces students to different ways in which their body experiences different aspects of motion. They can also be seen as having resonances with, and/or potential connection to, music, emotion, and narrative line. Laban technique is, in our work, a key component in the process of integration.

The Process of Integration

While the process of integration is ongoing throughout the Brandon University School of Music's program of work (in individual applied lessons, in voice seminar, and in ensemble work), the primary work of integration takes place in opera workshop. We start by developing the student's experience of relaxation, flexibility, and inner awareness—mostly through yoga work, building the awareness of how the breath and the body, its gestures and its movement, all interact. Then we begin making connection between body/breath/image/sound, moving into aspects of non-verbal narrative. The aim of the work is to enable the students to become more comfortable with using their body fully in both the process of creating musical sound and of telling story.

Concurrently, we're spending a lot of time on analytical techniques, looking at ways to dig into text and music to gain insight into what's going on emotionally and dramatically in any given moment. It's all grounded in a roughly Stanislavskian principle of emotional truth in the moment. However, unlike Method acting, also founded on Stanislavskian principles but which defines that truth in terms of the emotional experience of the *actor*, we work towards portraying that truth through the emotional experience of the CHARACTER, as defined by the original intent of the composer and librettist (or as clearly as that intent can be defined) and filtered through the vision of the director and conductor.

To begin the process of practical application of all these techniques, and while study and experimentation with movement continues, the singing actors start with non-singing monologue work (focusing on tracking the various movements I talked about before), and move into non-singing scene study (exploring the theory and practice of intentions, as well as introducing basic stagecraft). We then progress to study of challenging music theatre scenes, integrating both dialogue

and music so students get a sense of how the single line of drama flows through both. At the end of the first year of our program, we undertake a concert production of a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta. This exposes students to a challenging style of music and text, gives them experience in developing a role dramatically without having to worry about the additional challenges of full staging, costumes, props and lights, and provides an effective transition into the work of the program's second year—the production of a full length opera.

Opera Ensemble

In the second year of the program of voice performance training at the Brandon University School of Music, students spend a long, and intensive, period of time applying all the skills they've been exploring so far—musical interpretation, body work, character study and development, insight into drama, staging—to the development of a complete role in a full length opera. This takes place in the locus of integration, the rehearsal hall, the place where singing actors of *all* levels of experience integrate their musical insights, training and instincts with the material presented by the composer and the interpretive guidance of the stage director and conductor.

For undergraduate students, the challenge of interpreting a full role in an opera is undeniably demanding, but ultimately both necessary and rewarding. Students who've gone on from our undergraduate training program into grad school or a summer program have, without exception, told us that the experience of working on a full length project, in spite of being stressful and time consuming, helped them immeasurably and gave them an advantage when it came to comparison with other singing actors.

Notes from the Real World

Articles in the November 2009 issue of *Classical Singer Magazine* reinforce our belief in the value of both our work in general and of applying that work to a full-length opera. The publication contains several articles commenting on the increasing need for and value of beginning the process of training singing actors in acting and movement techniques at the undergraduate level.

Recent anecdotal experience bears this out. Sitting in on an afternoon of auditions for the Banff Centre Opera as Theatre Program, it soon became clear that of the fifteen or so performers onstage, the vast majority had strong voices and impressive musicality but little or no connection between the music, the text, the mind, the emotion, and the physical being. In other words, there was

little or nothing going on in the eyes, the face, or the body. All there was was the sound. Technically assured? Check. Flexible and grounded in core tone? Check. Moving? Not so much. Later, upon arrival at the Banff Center to begin an internship, it was not surprising to see that not one of those singers was in the company—and in watching the company work on Janacek's *Cunning Little Vixen* and on *Carmen*, it became even clearer why. The performers in that rehearsal room, in *that* locus of integration, had the connections working—the eyes, the voice, the musicality, the body (particularly when it came to *Vixen*), the sense of story and dramatic moment...it was all going on, and impressively so.

Anecdotally, at least, the evidence is there to see, and it is arguably there when you are in an audience and you see a performer who is really in the moment, as opposed to just making a good noise. You may not know exactly why that performer is special, but it's a safe bet that, instinctively or as the result of training, that performer is connected on a fundamental level with story. The good noise then becomes full of meaning and communicates on a deeper level greater than the sum of its parts.

Conclusion

The evidence, both anecdotal and scientific, bears out the practice of our work and the theories in which that practice is grounded. For a singing actor to both progress as an artist and advance in his or her career, he or she has to be trained to be exactly that: a singing actor.

Notes

¹ Wesley Balk, *The Complete Singing Actor* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

² Carolyn T. Amory. Hearing, Pre-hearing, Voice. Conference presentation, 4th International Conference on The Physiology and Acoustics of Singing, January 7-10, 2009, San Antonio, Texas, USA

³ Amy Likar. www.amylikar.com/bodymap.html.

⁴ Heather Buchanan. www.flutefocus.com/244-an-introduction-to-body-mapping.html

⁵ Heather Buchanan. www.heatherjbuchanan.com/BodyMapping/WhyBodyMapping.aspx

Works Cited

Balk, Wesley. *The Complete Singing Actor*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985.