

Making *Play* a part of *Practice* By Heidi Moss Erickson

Sometimes voice teachers are so preoccupied with *how* to sing that we forget *why* we sing (myself included). Humans have been expressing



emotions and telling stories through song throughout our entire history as *Homo sapiens*. It has been a way for our species to find group cohesion and solidify important

social bonds for tens of thousands of years. In fact, some scientists even postulate that song could have been the precursor to BOTH music and language¹. But what has happened, like many other aspects of human society, is that things started to get complicated. As cultures moved around the globe and humans strived to push forward, subtle intricacies infiltrated even our most fundamental of behaviors. Take cooking for example: we now add truffle oil to things. We cook on giant woks. We make mole sauce. Pain au chocolate. Food no longer was just for sustenance, it became a rich art full of techniques, and teachers, and strategies, TV shows, and gurus.

And so went the way of singing...from the impressive ragas of Hindustani, to Heavy Metal, to Opera, our species has created a vast wealth of musical genres which incorporate miraculous and diverse uses of the human voice. Of course, with that, came the techniques, the strategies, the YouTube tutorials, the American Idol contests, and (not surprisingly) the gurus. But in truth, they each offer the same purpose as our ancestors: not to worry about every mechanical action, but rather to sing to express; to generate a feeling that can be shared with our social group; to tell a story or express a deep emotion that is otherwise

challenging to emote. And when it happens, it is magic...

How do those fundamental aspects of song infuse our daily teaching lives? How much of the *why* do we impart to our students? How has vocal pedagogy embraced our biological and anthropological history? Most traditional lesson paradigms consist of a series of vocal exercises to target specific mechanical elements. We customize strategies for each student to address their technical needs. Then, the student generally goes on to the sing repertoire of the day where we appropriately assist them in achieving the best vocal goal for their level. At any given time, we can work on posture, jaw, tongue, lips, laryngeal configurations, breath, vibrancy, timbre, pitch, melody, rhythm, patterns, resonance, character, mood, musicality, more breath, text, pronunciation, syntax, vowels, consonants, etc. etc. In other words, it is a very long list of ideas that a singer and teacher can tackle in one session! Daunting in fact! But the problem is, our brains are not good multitaskers². Not to mention, the act of singing requires the coordination of over 100 muscles³ making it almost impossible to strategize all of the elements impeding a singer's progress in a given moment. Thus, there can be too much of a good thing in teaching voice: it is impossible to address all of permutations of factors which can impact a singer's output.

However, there is something we can do to help a singer achieve skill, both in the studio and at home, without overwhelming them with technical details: encourage *play*. The goal as a teacher can be twofold: 1) to find a simple, efficient system for a singer to navigate their instrument 2) to make the process of singing fun at all stages and levels. Interestingly, play a place where those two ideas actually become one...

Jaak Panskepp was a pioneer in affective neuroscience and he discovered some fundamental circuitry common among many animals, including humans. Although the concepts are ever-changing in the field, Panskepp's ideas still hold true on some foundational levels. Interestingly, the idea of using play and seeking to learn is more universal for ALL animals than one might think. However, I feel our world in general has been lacking those

fronts, and the singing universe was no different. Fun and rest can be bad words. Most people equate play as the anthesis to learning and progress, when in fact, it is essential for both.

I also noticed through my own teaching that a student's curiosity, freedom to play without judgement, and uninhibited exploration were the keys to both their improvement and happiness about their instrument. The art actually became easier the more they engaged their inner seeker and play animal. Anxieties disappeared. Confidence grew. These singers also had all of the classic resources available to them: i.e. the latest in acoustics, diction, exercises (for any genre!), evidence-based vocal pedagogy, and my own approaches taken from my research into the neuroscience of vocalization. The technical approaches were still a part of our lessons and practice, however, judgement-free play joined the party. We customize what interested them, what they needed, and what helped them the most. The common thread no matter what the approach, was the activation of their inner seeker and agency to play.

Play is not a method. There aren't a set of protocols, exercises to follow, nor gurus for wisdom. Instead the goal is daring to experiment with ideas to create the best path forward, regardless of level or genre. What are some ideas? Since our biology is wired to storytelling and emotion, we can start with that. For example, sometimes a song's literal text does not align with the vocal energy needed for a piece: e.g. to sing a sad song while literally sad will not be very successful unless the motor skill has truly been automated to a point where nothing will stop its flow. So how can a singer play with a sad song? Sing it joyfully! Or angrily! Or choose to be a very specific character like a Baptist preacher or a cabaret singer. The point is 1) to be as varied as possible 2) to be as specific as possible. In play there is no right or wrong. Fast. Slow. Loud. Soft. Anything is fair game. You can even do it with exercises! The pushback at first is "Isn't this interfering with authenticity?" or "How can I be true to the composer or text if I am thinking something crazy and silly?". Well, the truth is, the human brain is smarter than you realize: all of the work on the piece—its literal translation, its musical origins, its technical refinements—have not departed the mind, but rather are feeding the output subconsciously. The play is to find other

motor targets for the instrument to *feel* and *experience* something which may yield the best vocal output. In other words, a technical win from a non-technical directive. One can then correlate it to a technical event, e.g. "That bubbly cheerleader character really enhanced your appoggio for that lied!". Play is for both the studio and at-home practice. It gives the brain 'more than one way' which it likes. Then, in performance, it has more resources to draw from: the voice 'remembers'.

So much of a singer's life are micromanaged and regulated these days, so play is a way for them to have a say and not worry about right and wrong. Be silly with them. Give them time in the lesson to explore without judgement. Put '*play*' in their practice protocol. Ask them "Who were you this week when you sang this song?". Allow for modularity and flexibility: the broader purpose engages the whole in addition to the parts, and can involve things beyond emotion and character: imagery, movement, imagination, and improvisation are all welcome. The premise is we ALL are in fact, scientists in the human experience: like the baby in the crib, we can explore our external world through play and create our own inner constructs to make sense of what is happening around us and inside of us as humans and singers. We then have more to draw from, and we are able to return to where we started: why we sing in the first place. Not to execute technical minutiae, but rather to tell a story or convey emotion. The effect in the end will be to make singers better faster. With joy.

Endnotes

1. Aniruddh D. Patel, *Music, Language and the Brain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. ISBN 978-0-19-512375-3
2. Madore KP, Wagner AD. Multitasking of Cerebrum. 2019 Apr 1;2019:cer-04-19. PMID: 32206165; PMCID: PMC7075496.
3. Ackermann H, Riecker A. The contribution of the insula to motor aspects of speech production: a review and a hypothesis. *Brain Lang*. 2004 May;89(2):320-8. doi: 10.1016/S0093-934X(03)00347-X. PMID: 15068914.