

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 language.¹ 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 sing the 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,



Heidi Moss Erickson

patterns, resonance, character, mood, musicality, more breath, text, pronunciation, syntax, vowels, consonants, 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 multitaskers.² 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 antithesis 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 customized 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 is 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. Multicosts of Multitasking. *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.

Heidi Moss Erickson, is a San Francisco Bay Area performer, educator, and scientist. Noted for her "rich and radiant soprano" (Edward Oriz, Sacramento Bee) she has performed both in the United States and abroad. A champion of new music, she frequently collaborates with renowned living composers including Daron Hagen, David Conte, Tarik O'Regan, Henry Mollicone, Jake Heggie, and her husband, Kurt Erickson. Heidi has also garnered recognition in major competitions, including the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, the Liederkrantz Awards, and the MacAllister Awards. In addition to her musical life, Heidi graduated with a double biology and music degree from Oberlin and a masters in biochemistry at the University of Pennsylvania. She studied telomeres at Rockefeller University and has several publications, including a landmark paper in the journal *Cell*. This was a revolutionary discovery showing that the ends of DNA are looped and it was featured in the *New York Times*. Her interest in voice science came from her work in the lab of the late Richard Miller at Oberlin. In 2007, a rare cranial nerve injury sidelined her singing career, and was warned she may not ever perform again. Using her own scientific research and strategies, particularly in how speech and singing is processed in the brain, she rehabilitated to return to the art she loves. She has applied these concepts and designed a novel pedagogy to train singers of all levels. In addition to a private studio, Heidi teaches vocal physiology at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. She has been an invited speaker at the NATS National Conference, The Pacific Voice Conference, Cleveland Institute of Music, University of Oregon, Vocal ProcessUK, Vocology In Practice, and NerdNiteSF. Her courses on *Singing in the Brain* have been featured at the VoiceWorkshop UK, SingSpace, and through her private studio. This past year she was also featured as a keynote speaker for the British Voice Association Conference alongside Johan Sundberg. Her writings have appeared in blogs, such as *The Naked Vocalist* and in her journal club entitled "Minding the Gap: connecting research from basic science and neuroscience to vocal pedagogy". She is the wife of composer/pianist Kurt Erickson, winner of the NATS Art Song Prize, and they proudly parent 4 children together.