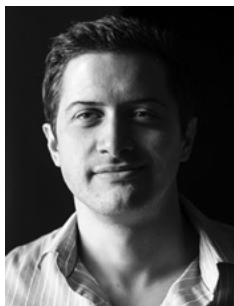


Inspiring Autonomous Artists: A Framework for Independent Singing

Travis Sherwood



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INTRODUCTION

DR. SCHAUNARD, A BURGEONING YOUNG voice teacher three years into his first full time collegiate position, is excited to bring students to a regional NATS competition. Dr. Schaunard, his students, and their pianist arrive on the campus of the host university the morning of the competition. Following a brief visit to the registration table, Dr. Schaunard instructs his students who are competing that morning to find a practice room and begin warming up their voices. The students make a mad dash for the practice rooms in hopes of acquiring one before the other participants in the competition claim them all. After greeting a couple of colleagues from the region, Dr. Schaunard makes his way to the practice rooms to check on his students. Suddenly, a practice room door opens and one of Dr. Schaunard's sopranos emerges looking concerned. With wavering trepidation in the tone of her voice, the soprano asks Dr. Schaunard to help her warm up for the competition. Happy to support his student, Dr. Schaunard enters the practice room, takes a seat at the piano, and leads the soprano through a series of vocalises they have performed in her voice lessons for the past three years.

Dr. Schaunard's story is a familiar one to many voice teachers who have brought students to a competition. It is quite common for students to request assistance from their voice teacher when warming up for a competition or performance; it is also quite common for voice teachers to embrace any opportunity to support their students. Voice teachers, particularly in higher education, are often critical members of a student's support system. Frequently, voice teachers will counsel students as they transition from high school to college and throughout their degree(s), attempting to steer students toward the ultimate goal of becoming independent singers;¹ however, after several years of lessons many students often are still reticent to make their own technical and artistic decisions. After three years of consistent vocal instruction, why did Dr. Schaunard's soprano feel as though she needed his help to warm up? How could Dr. Schaunard provide this soprano with the tools to exercise her independence as a singer/artist?

In an effort to answer these questions, this article will explore the traditional teacher-student relationship and offer modifications to this teaching tradition to encourage a shift to a more student-centered pedagogy. Structuring voice instruction within an overarching framework for singing may facilitate this

pedagogic shift. Coupled with the framework for singing, teachers and students can engage in student-centered dialoguing and questioning, empowering students to explore their own process for singing. As students gain confidence in their process, they may allow their bodies/minds the freedom to make autonomous technical and artistic decisions in the moment of singing. Finally, this article will investigate how keeping students at the center of the repertoire selection process may make it a formative process that encourages independence for both teachers and students.

THE MASTER-APPRENTICE DYAD

Both singing and the teaching of singing are art forms steeped in tradition. Included in this tradition, young singers must learn a healthy vocal technique, the rules of diction in various languages, performance practice, ways to interpret poetry, musicianship, acting, and movement, to name only a few. Voice teachers, often viewed as consummate artists in the eyes of students, take on the heavy responsibility of preparing their students one day to embody these traditions. Through this process, voice teachers and their students often adopt a master-apprentice dyad,² a tradition that is typically rooted in the experience and expertise of the teacher, where students will consistently refer to the master for employing technique and emotion. Ultimately, the structure of the partnership establishes dependence between student and teacher.³ This dependent relationship causes the student to default to the teacher's ideas, methods, and choices; the teacher's process becomes the student's process. As a result, students may ignore their own background, ideas, and choices, and question their own abilities. When students cannot find themselves in the singing process, it can be difficult for their bodies/minds to allow them the freedom to perform with vulnerability, honesty, and individuality.⁴

Modifying the Master-Apprentice Dyad

By making modifications to the traditional master-apprentice relationship, voice teachers may structure the learning process to embrace the experiences of students and encourage independence. Teaching voice is a three-fold endeavor: it requires a solid understanding of voice pedagogy, strong communicative skills with which to convey understanding, and unyielding interpersonal

skills to build a trusting relationship with students so they are willing to take risks in their singing.⁵ When voice teachers merge theory with practice, they seamlessly bridge vocal technique with the unique experiences of individual students. Contextualizing vocal technique with regard to the individual student invites a form of student-centered learning. Student-centered learning not only places emphasis on and values the knowledge and experiences the student possesses, but also builds upon these qualities.⁶ Together, teachers and students may engage in vocal instruction as learners, inviting both parties to contextualize and internalize their own independent mental/physical process for singing.

In the traditional master-apprentice dyad, students may be timid to make technical and artistic choices outside the dictates and approval of the master. According to Richard Miller, students of singing "should be equipped to make judgments about opposing technical viewpoints that must be faced by any singer in the professional world."⁷ Rather than imposing preexisting knowledge without consideration of context, voice teachers may teach students the process of *how* to learn, allowing them to teach themselves the content in an authentic way. Authentic learning facilitates students' abilities to envision and enact learning within their worlds.⁸ To do this, a framework might be helpful to guide teachers and students as they create a meaningful process to engage with and understand technique, repertoire, character, and interpretation. If the ultimate goal of teaching voice is to inspire a culture of autonomy, then voice teachers should reflect this in their pedagogy and process.

A FRAMEWORK FOR ESTABLISHING VOCAL INDEPENDENCE AND AUTONOMOUS ARTISTRY

Contextualizing the mental/physical process of singing within a framework can invite students to focus on specific goals and recognize for themselves when they have achieved them. A framework can serve as a tool for both teachers and students to organize their learning processes. It is uncommon for students to learn to sing in the voice lesson; rather, the voice lesson is where students develop the necessary skills to teach themselves how to sing in the practice room.⁹ Through a positive and structured focus, such as a framework,

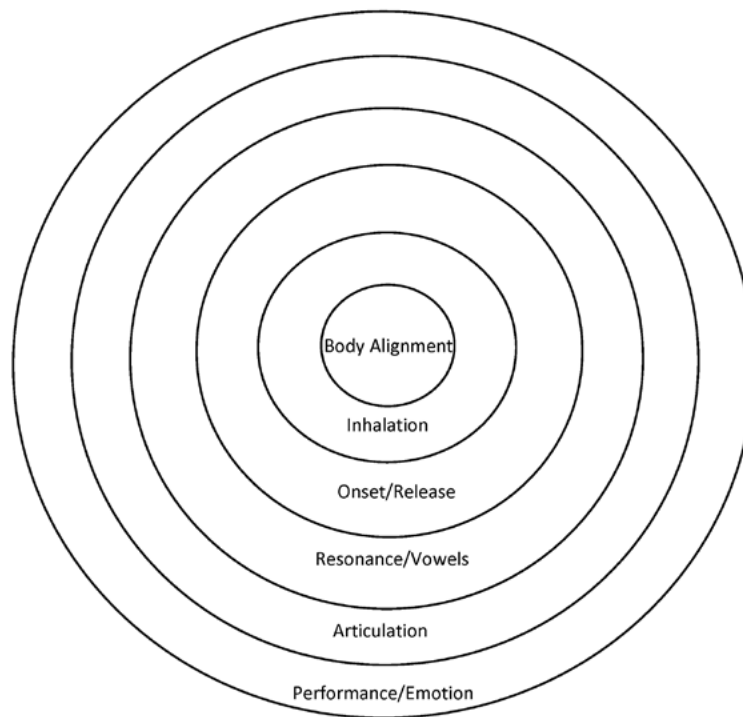


Figure 1. Framework for a process of singing.

students have a blueprint to become their own best voice teacher, ultimately assuming responsibility for their own learning processes.

A study of the correlation between teacher-student interactions in the studio and student practice behaviors concluded that the teacher's instruction style had a significantly larger impact on student practice habits than the practice methods suggested by the teacher. In other words, "What the teachers actually did during the lesson (e.g., the teacher demonstrating a particular technique or having the student try a particular approach) had a more profound influence upon their students' practice than what they said."¹⁰ When teachers and students employ a framework as a map for instruction in the voice lesson, students then can use that same map as a tool to navigate their vocal journey in the practice room. Using a framework provides students with the means to investigate vocal technique independently, ultimately understanding the parts of the singing process more personally. When students are no longer dependent upon teachers to determine which part(s) of their singing process warrants specific attention, they have taken a significant stride toward independence.

The framework in Figure 1 is one possible example for structuring voice instruction in a way that may inspire a student-centered culture of autonomy. Structured as a series of concentric circles, this framework provides a map to guide both teachers and students through the systematic development of a process for singing. When students understand their process for singing, they are often empowered to make technical and artistic choices. Each step of the process is contingent upon the other steps; the circles of this framework represent parts of a whole. Both students and teachers should engage with this framework starting from the center circle and then work consecutively outward. They may revisit circles consistently and fluidly—moving inward and outward as necessary—as they seek specificity in their process for singing.

Preparing the Body to Sing

The central two circles in this framework, body alignment and inhalation, are the parts of the process that prepare the body to sing. From the author's experience, many young singers often launch themselves into singing, and then try to correct the sound they are hearing.

As Thomas Hemsley describes, “By the time the sound issues from a singer’s mouth, it is too late to determine what character that sound should have.”¹¹ However, pianists would never throw their hands at the keyboard in hopes of landing on the correct keys and then make adjustments as necessary; nor would a timpanist strike the drum before tuning it to the correct pitch. These actions do not focus on the process; rather, they focus on the product. Instead, pianists take the time to prepare their body and mind by recognizing the pitches they desire to play, thoughtfully bring their hands to the appropriate keys, and depress the keys in such a manner as to achieve a preconceived sound. Similarly, a timpanist would tune the drum to the correct pitch prior to striking it. When singers properly prepare their body to sing through a specific and positive process, they may allow themselves to be in the moment of their singing rather than focusing on a sound they have already made.

At the center of this framework is body alignment. If body alignment is not functioning effectively then there is often no need to address the myriad other vocal issues resulting from the poor body alignment. Those issues may well be symptoms of the larger problem of poor body alignment. Rather than focusing the instruction on the issues, voice teachers may instruct students on how to find a proper body alignment for singing. If the goal is to inspire independent singers, then the learning tools provided in the lesson must be clear and students must be able to monitor their own success. One way students can systematically find proper body alignment is to build it from the ground up. Feet should be shoulder width apart or a little bit wider, knees slightly bent, hips over knees, feeling a stretch through the spine, and ears should remain aligned over the shoulders.¹² When students perceive a technical issue during a practice session, they can attempt to address the issue by first checking in with their body alignment. If students determine that body alignment is not the root of the technical issue, they may move outward to the next circle on the framework, inhalation.

Breathing is probably one of the most controversial subjects in voice pedagogy; however, all voice pedagogues likely will agree that singers must prepare the body with air before they sing.¹³ By breaking down the process of inhalation in the voice lesson (for example, inviting the air into the lungs through a release low in the body and establishing resonating space), students

may engage with this same process in the practice room and determine their own success.

Phonation

Once the body and mind are prepared to sing, then singers may begin to address phonation. Following alignment and inhalation, the next three circles of the framework—onset/release, resonance/vowels, and articulation—are the parts of the process that deal with phonation. Discovering a healthy and balanced phonation can seem like a daunting task to students of singing. Fears of phonating incorrectly, unhealthily, or not understanding why they are phonating successfully can feed the insecurities of young singers. Understanding the parts of phonation (onset/release, resonance/vowels, and articulation) can provide students with a positive process for addressing issues in the practice room. Rather than focusing on the plethora of things they do not want to occur while phonating, students may engage with a positive process, instructing their bodies what to do as opposed to what not to do while singing.¹⁴ Together, voice teachers and students can develop vocalises that address the different parts of phonation, allowing students to engage with, edit, and create these exercises in the practice room as they clarify their process for singing. When engaged in the creative process of vocalises, students may develop a real understanding of the exercises, including how and why they function, as well as how and why they are performing them successfully or unsuccessfully.

Performance/Emotion

When students are confident in their process for singing, then technique may provide a vehicle for artistic expression. The final step in this framework is performance/emotion. While discussing the necessary components of artistry, Clifton Ware describes that,

Vocal artistry occurs when performing artists successfully coordinate many complex technical skills into a singular psycho-neuromuscular response or interpretation that expressively communicates a series of emotions or ideas in an informed, authentic musico-dramatic presentation.¹⁵

When singers feel unencumbered with the self-doubt caused by insecure vocal technique, they may allow

themselves to take risks in performance, demonstrating vulnerability, honesty, and individuality through their artistic choices. Dynamics, rubato, tempo, timbre, articulation, vibrato rate, eye focus, and gesture are just a few examples of artistic choices students can make in the moment of singing. A framework for singing may encourage students to investigate their individual process for singing. Throughout that investigation, students may find themselves in their process, ultimately, yielding autonomous artistry informed by their experiences in the voice studio, practice room, and the rest of their lives. Throughout their lifetime, singers may continue to engage with this framework, clarifying and simplifying their mental/physical process for singing.

DIALOGUING AND QUESTIONING IN THE VOICE LESSON

Coupled with a framework for singing that engages both body and mind, dialoguing and questioning in the voice lesson can play an important role in developing an autonomous singer. Over the course of a voice lesson, both teachers and students can engage in a two-way conversation focused around the learning process. Rather than indoctrinating students in the teachers' process, teachers can ask students questions that will lead them to discover their own process for singing. For example, if a young tenor is unable to access his upper register in a particular piece of repertoire the teacher may ask the tenor, "What do you think you should adjust in your singing process to facilitate access to your upper register?" Together, teacher and tenor can structure their pursuit of the upper register within the framework for singing, beginning with body alignment and working outward to performance/emotion. Throughout their pursuit, the teacher can continue to ask the young tenor questions about his process, such as: "What are you thinking about and feeling differently? What is your body telling you to adjust?" The teacher may also ask questions that lead the tenor to draw from his experiences outside the voice studio: "Do you feel you can access your upper register with more ease in a different setting (choir rehearsal, performance, practice room, shower) or while singing a different piece or genre of repertoire? If so, what do you believe has changed in your process in those different situations that allows you to access your upper register

with more ease?" Through student-centered questioning, the young tenor may draw from his experiences in and out of the voice studio to solve his own technical and artistic quandaries. He may begin to assume ownership for his mental/physical process for singing.

When students begin to name their thinking and learning processes, they take ownership of their education; as a result, teachers may take on less of the role of master and more the role of mentor. A mentor, Ware writes, "is especially important for long-term relationships, since the teacher has an opportunity to guide the student from a state of dependence to independence."¹⁶ Through the acts of dialoguing and questioning, the master-apprentice dyad begins to shift. Teachers assume the roles of both mentor and learner, guiding students through a mutual process of vocal self-discovery.

When voice teachers assume the role of learner, they may allow themselves to exhibit vulnerability, honesty, and individuality in the voice lesson, which often provides students with the security to do the same. While discussing the attributes of outstanding teachers of singing, Marvin Keenze describes that voice teachers must "know literature, repertoire, poetry, history, and to always be a student ourselves."¹⁷ When voice teachers engage in singing as co-learners, they show respect toward the individual processes of their students. Additionally, they invite open dialogue in the lesson, empowering students to assert their independence. With the structure provided by the framework, students may continue the conversation from the voice lesson into the practice room as they seek vulnerability, honesty, and individuality in technique and artistry. Students may no longer try to "get it right"; instead, they may listen and respond to their bodies as they make technical and artistic choices without asking for permission. Students' listening and responding lays a foundation for them to continue making music and developing their artistry and vocal technique throughout their lifetime.

SELECTING REPERTOIRE

Traditionally, it is within the purview of teachers to select repertoire for their students; however, there are several benefits to including students in the process, keeping their worlds at the core of the teaching and learning process. Reflecting on his work with his own students, W. Stephen Smith centers on choice.

Students often ask my advice on whether to do a certain competition or sing a specific aria, and I do my best to present the pros and cons of each choice as I see it. That way, they may have more information on which to base their choice, but the choice is still ultimately theirs, and they leave the process empowered and more independent.¹⁸

Empowering students to make choices regarding careers, artistry, technique, and repertoire plays a crucial role in establishing student independence. When students can identify with a repertoire selection, they are often more likely to spend time practicing that repertoire selection. Scott McCoy expounds, "Repertoire should be selected not only to forge a developmental path, but also to maintain the student's excitement for singing . . ." ¹⁹ While there is often a standard body of literature deemed appropriate for specific voice types and abilities, considering students as a whole when choosing repertoire, and including them in the selection process invites them to express themselves as artists.

Repertoire preferences or requests often include specific selections, poets or poetic themes, composers, languages, styles, and aesthetics, to name a few. The process of repertoire selection can be a formative and meaningful process for both students and teachers. By actively participating in the process, students may begin to understand how to select repertoire that is appropriate for their voice and development, and teachers may get a glimpse into the worlds of their students.

CONCLUSION

Returning to the vignette, it is evident that Dr. Schaunard enjoyed providing assistance when his soprano asked him for help while warming up her voice at the NATS competition; however, it is safe to say that the inherent interdependence of the master-apprentice dyad was limiting her artistic and technical growth.²⁰ Through student-centered vocal instruction, Dr. Schaunard may mentor his soprano—and all of his students—toward autonomous artistry. Providing a framework may encourage a student like Dr. Schaunard's young soprano to investigate her own process for singing, fueling her confidence in her ability to properly warm up her voice. Perhaps Dr. Schaunard would experience an even greater sense of accomplishment when his stu-

dent embraces her independence, makes artistic and technical choices without asking for permission, and no longer requires his assistance. If the ultimate goal of voice instruction is to inspire independent singers who demonstrate autonomous artistry, voice teachers might consider themselves truly successful when students no longer require their assistance.

When teaching and learning an art form so steeped in tradition as is singing, it is easy for both teachers and students to feel overwhelmed by these many traditions, yielding instruction that lacks focus, direction, and individualization. As such, it is essential to keep students and their worlds at the core of voice instruction. Beautiful singing requires great vulnerability, honesty, and individuality. Making modifications to the master-apprentice dyad can transform the traditional roles of teachers and students, allowing more room for vulnerability, honesty, and individuality in the voice lesson. Likewise, organizing voice instruction within a framework may begin to demystify singing technique, potentially providing students with a solid foundation for independent exploration in their vocal process.

As students begin to understand how and why they sing, they may engage in the creative process in the moment of singing. Autonomous artists make choices and do not ask for permission. Because the master-apprentice tradition is rooted in the apprentice learning from the experiences of the master/teacher, it often limits the amount of space available for the experiences of the apprentice/student in the lesson. By adopting the roles of mentor and co-learner, teachers of singing may guide their students on a journey of vocal self-discovery. Students teach themselves how to sing, teachers engage in the learning process as fellow artists and learners. Through a student centered-pedagogy, voice teachers may simultaneously honor the many traditions of singing and inspire the next generation of singers to view themselves as artists, ultimately preserving the integrity of this cherished art form while also seeing to its continued evolution.

NOTES

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~ Dr. Wendy LeBorgne
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