

The Effects Of Childhood Sexual Abuse On Singers

Lauren McQuistin



ONE OF THE TRULY UNIQUE AND fascinating things about the human voice as an instrument is how the entirety of the singer's physicality is utilized for its production. The voice is something that grows with the body and is intrinsically linked to our self in both a physical and emotional way.¹ Being thus linked, when the body undergoes trauma there are inevitable repercussions for the voice, especially in its capacity as an instrument. When dealing with a young adult that has been subject to childhood sexual abuse, in training the body and voice as a classical instrument one encounters the possibility for the posttraumatic effects of the experience to manifest themselves.² Considering the longlasting influence of childhood sexual abuse on young singers, one must consider Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) to fully understand the effect: "Post traumatic stress refers to certain enduring psychological symptoms that occur in reaction to a highly distressing, psychologically disruptive event."³

The event or events in question have longlasting effects that are often manifested physically, often at later dates and in unexpected circumstances.⁴ While the trauma has a serious immediate impact on the mental state of the victim, the emotional turmoil caused by such an event also has a significant subsequent effect on the nervous system.⁵ This way the effects of the trauma are relived and thus the "debilitating symptoms associated with the trauma" can be recreated even after the abuse has ended, and can inflict the victim with intrusive thoughts and bodily sensations for years after the abuse ends.⁶ The posttraumatic effects of abuse manifest in symptoms that range from generalized anxiety, to repercussions that have been proven to effect bodily functions.⁷ It can result in abnormalities in the nervous system that lead to physical problems such as headaches, stomach pain, asthma, bladder infections, and chronic pelvic pain.⁸

A close examination of how the effects of childhood sexual abuse can create difficulties for the young classical singer can inform teachers on how to consider and navigate them effectively. It is important to note that unless they are professionally qualified to do so, it is not appropriate for the voice teacher to render mental health evaluations. Unless trauma and mental health counselling is one's specific sphere of expertise, it is crucial that a student is guided toward, or encouraged to seek, professional help with this issue, if it is apt and safe for them to do so. Examples outlined in this article are for informative purposes, and a resource should a student disclose certain

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information. It is not a diagnostic criterion or a treatment plan for a student who has experienced trauma.

One of the fundamental things taught to young singers is the principle of breathing correctly. In her book, *Singing and Childhood Sexual Abuse: Conversation with Voice Teachers*, Grace Weber Johnson recalls a student whose breathing exercises “caused her to retrieve memories of incest faster than she could process them.”⁹ This is reflective of physical trauma and mental trauma acting hand in hand. The physical demand of effective breath support led to an unexpected, intrusive emotional reaction that the student could not necessarily understand or control, an example of posttraumatic stress. Diane Austin explains that, “Singing is a neuromuscular activity and muscular patterns are closely linked to psychological patterns.”¹⁰ With both of these things being combined in a physically demanding situation, such as correct breathing and support, it is common for “sudden intrusive sensory experiences” to occur.¹¹

A common reaction to childhood sexual abuse is dissociation, where the trauma of an event is so severe that the brain disconnects from the body in order to appropriately cope with certain events. This is the brain’s way of protecting itself from intrusive thoughts that it can’t handle, especially in high pressure moments.¹² Events that trigger such a reaction can be as normal as everyday occurrences, which can be considered traumatic to a survivor of abuse.¹³ This can become problematic when teaching voice, as students who have been exposed to such trauma can find difficulty, or reluctance, with assessing natural sensations, particularly in a state of dissociation.¹⁴ The brain’s protective measures can inhibit them from accessing their natural breath, as a means of shielding them from any sensation that is close to the traumatic physical sensations that they experienced during the abuse. Teachers cannot show the student how to access and experience breath; they must communicate the principles through explanation, demonstration, and experimentation. Therefore, this journey can be extremely long and complicated. In such cases the teacher must proceed with patience and understanding if unexpected reactions occur. Students often may not understand exactly why they are experiencing a sensation so vividly or suddenly, and though it seems disproportionate, their reaction should never be diminished or belittled.

Bodily awareness is directly connected to the idea of correct posture that is commonly associated with beautiful singing. When singing one must utilize the body to its highest potential, which becomes an overwhelming task for victims, as their “own physiology becomes a source of fear.”¹⁵ To ask victims of abuse to use their physicality is to ask them to place concentrated attention on the very thing that was violated. It is clearly understandable, therefore, that victims are reluctant to assume correct posture, when their body carries so much emotional pain and fear. With the cases of victims who react in dissociative ways, they are persistently dealing with and attempting to subdue the feeling of being threatened as a result of the experience.¹⁶ The feeling of the threat can have a lasting effect in that “their bodies continue to react to certain physical and emotional stimuli as if there were a continuing threat of annihilation.”¹⁷ When students perceive breath and support as something that can potentially harm them or disrupt the protective measures they have in place, teaching becomes an extremely delicate task, where student feelings must always be considered. The idea of threat can lead to unnecessary tensions, pressures, and reactions being created in the body due to the body’s protective measures.¹⁸ Webber Johnson discusses a student that she encountered who had a severe emotional reaction to the vowel [a] as it was closely connected to her memories of her abuse.¹⁹ The open and widened nature of the [a] vowel position put the student in a position where she felt vulnerable and open to attack, causing extreme tension in her overall body. The student could not allow her body to let down its protective measures and thus could not create the free space and relaxed jaw required for the [a] vowel. A student’s well-being should always be prioritized over vowel brightness; however, small yet significant steps can be made to gradually reduce the tension held in the jaw, allowing for greater space and release. To assume one can simply drop the jaw and lift the soft palate in a single gesture is asking too much of a student who has several years of protective measures coded into her/his physiology. Therefore, a gradual approach is necessary.

Bodily tensions are counterproductive for singing, since for the voice to be produced in a healthy way with a steady flow of air, the body must be suitably relaxed to allow for the appropriate muscular processes to take

place. Some teachers might consider using Alexander Technique for young singers in this situation. Hilary Mayers explains Alexander Technique as “a re-education of habitual movement patterns.”²⁰ This is the idea of re-teaching the body how to be at its most natural form, making students aware of behaviors that have been formed and teaching them how to break away from the habits that inhibit potential. The founding principle of Alexander Technique is balance, and in the practice of it one must always move toward equilibrium.²¹ If studied closely, balance can be potentially life changing for sufferers. Treating the body’s tensions brings balance to the destructive effects of the physical manifestations of trauma. Therefore, this process can help toward the healing of trauma that is equally rooted physically and mentally, with a practice that puts emphasis on the mental control of physical awareness.²² Understandably, this could potentially be a very difficult task for pupils to undertake, as the tensions they have developed have to be faced and often processed, where previously they had been suppressed. Should the body’s posttraumatic tension be released in an improper or unbalanced way, this can lead to re-traumatization, due to the mental and physical connection being disturbed, as the brain’s protective measures have to be compromised to access the body’s pre-abuse, natural state. Should a teacher be present for such an occurrence, she/he must be extremely patient and not disturb the process the student is going through.

Webber Johnson describes the process of tension development as a result of abuse as “Body Armoring.”²³ This defense mechanism can be so extreme that it creates muscle spasms in the body from the pressure. She explains that, “It is determined to be psychogenic. When the abdomen is involved, breathing and vibrato are compromised. When the larynx is involved, the term psychogenic dysphonia describes the condition.”²⁴ This suggests that psychological trauma can lead to body armoring that directly affects the larynx and creates this tension. Body armoring is extremely damaging to the singing voice; a tense larynx produces a pinched or strained sound, meaning that the voice will not move easily and the sound will be forced. Diane Austin recounts a student saying that, “I feel there is a huge scream in my throat.”²⁵ This “scream” that she identifies perfectly illustrates the turmoil that the body goes through.

Personified as a scream, the sensation truly conveys the emotional pain, but also suggests tension, discomfort, and something being ill at ease in the larynx itself.

With the body in a state of protective tension, students could potentially be overcompensating for their lack of freedom in the abdomen by placing more emphasis on the throat and mouth muscles to create the desired sound.²⁶ This creates vocal problems as the larynx experiences unnecessary strain, where the burden should be shared by the process of support. Under such immense pressure, there can be long term implications for the state of the larynx and its muscles, due to working harder than they should.

With one’s body being the source of one’s voice, and the body being the very thing that was violated during an incident of childhood sexual abuse, the natural internal resonance required for singing can be a difficult thing for survivors to achieve. The creation of resonance is crucial for singing, and there is potential for difficulties to emerge around this focused training of feeling sensations that previously could have been perceived as traumatic.²⁷ The very act of feeling the body’s vibrations and sensations, to use them as markers, is disproportionately difficult for a victim, because as the act of feeling anything at all, when posttraumatic stress is triggered, is something associated with extreme emotional and physical pain. Teachers must consider that students engaged with a process of dissociation are unable to feel sensations of resonance as acutely as those who have not been abused. The abilities for assessing a physical sensation are so numbed that resonance can be something that is nearly impossible to achieve. Should the dissociative experience shift and resonance achieved, the feeling of resonance can be potentially disturbing for students, as the very feeling of resonance can feel like an intrusive and unwelcome experience, especially if it’s their first time focusing so closely on it.²⁸ In instances like this, a teacher must continue to check in with the student and his/her experience of this sensation, and assess whether it is productive to continue if the student’s discomfort is outweighing their learning experience.

A common theme among victims of childhood sexual abuse, usually at the hands of a figure of authority, is that their body was confused by the effects of what was happening to them. They experienced all new sensations for which they had no explanation. Bessel Van der Kolk

explores this in his book on trauma, and states that, “They lose the ability to modulate their physiological responses to stress in general, which leads to a decreased capacity to utilize bodily signals as guides for action.”²⁹ Van der Kolk explores the difficulties that we have as teachers, how we do not have external access to the techniques we are talking about—it is all synthesized within the student and they must respond appropriately for progress to be made. If students have undergone trauma and cannot rely on the body’s responses to give natural insight into how they are feeling, particularly if the effects of trauma have altered their responses to physical sensations, the teaching process is made more difficult. These students cannot account how they are truly feeling physically or follow physical instinct as effectively as those who do not suffer this symptom and can make describing resonance extremely challenging.

Disengagement can become extremely severe in some cases; sometimes, it can extend to not being able to perceive the body correctly, which can lead to an aversion to mirrors.³⁰ It is often common that survivors develop severe body image disorders. A negative perception of their body is a defense mechanism that enables victims to reject their body and “view pleasure in their bodies as taboo.”³¹ The lack of the sense of self that comes with the coupling of bodily disengagement and negative perceptions of their physicality can make singers extremely reluctant to perform and have people view their body. The demands of having a keen sense of bodily awareness and complete ownership of the body are challenging for young singers that have not experienced sexual abuse; thus, abuse victims have a doubly difficult task to undertake and the process can take an inordinate amount of time. Both awareness and ownership of the body require victims to actually confront and process the bodily harm that was caused to them, which makes teaching them an extremely sensitive and complex process.

Survivors of sexual abuse usually have suffered at the hands of someone in a position of power, or even someone who was intended to be their protector, which can cause the survivor to have a general mistrust of authority figures. John Briere suggests that a common symptom in survivors is, “distrust of others, anger at and/or fear of those with greater power, concerns about abandonment, and perceptions of injustice.”³² Because of this distrust, certain steps in the learning process can be made more

complex. Mistrust can cause problems for exercises where, for example, the teacher would consider asking permission to use physical touch to demonstrate breath management or posture. If a student has disclosed abuse, or shows signs of discomfort, it probably would not be effective, as the student may not be able to distinguish between an adult wanting to cause harm and an adult wanting to help. The interpersonal relationship between student and teacher can be misunderstood, because of the student’s warped perceptions of authority and control. Misunderstandings between the teacher’s intentions with the student, and the relationship itself, can be misconstrued, as normal or natural relationships can still create a fearful reaction in the student.³³

Survivors often have difficulties trusting positions of authority, but the relationships they build with teachers can have an extremely positive effect. Teachers can create an environment where students can learn to trust that an adult can be a positive influence on their development and not simply be someone who exploits them.³⁴ Due to the brain’s need to anesthetize itself from painful memories, there is a common theme of sufferers of abuse to exhibit multiple personality disorder (now more commonly referred to as dissociative identity disorder).³⁵ As well as resulting in the aforementioned physical difficulties, this creates an issue with performance demands. Beautiful singing cannot be achieved without convincing dramatic instincts or the conveying of appropriate emotions, and when a singer has a displaced sense of self this can be extremely inconsistent. Without a fundamental idea of “self,” it is more difficult for survivors to draw from emotions, since the process of emotional numbing has altered how they perceive the very notion of emotion. With teachers and colleagues this can manifest itself in what can be perceived as troublesome ways.

How a child is treated (or maltreated) early in life influences his or her growing self-awareness . . . without such an internal base, individuals may lack the ability to soothe or comfort themselves adequately, leading to what appear to be overreactions to stress or painful effects.³⁶

Studies also show that victims have a lower sense of self-esteem and self-worth.³⁷ Moreover, “the child may make assumptions about his or her inherent badness, based on misinterpretation of maltreatment as, in fact,

punishment for unknown transgressions.”³⁸ When involved in a discipline that depends on constant critique to properly develop, it may be more difficult for victims to be able to process criticism as a means to improve as opposed to another way a person in a position of power can hurt or damage them. This requires more output of energy, as they are having to overcompensate for their nervous tension in this high level of stress for them.³⁹

Teachers must be careful to implement their craft as well as provide emotional support, never having one of those requirements overtake the other. Young adults who have survived such a grievance have the potential to be skilled interpreters of the emotional content of poetry and opera, but this must be navigated with care. As previously mentioned, it is not the job of the teacher to provide psychotherapy, but should the student be in a process of psychotherapy it is important for the teacher to be aware of certain sensitivities. Austin articulates the plight of children beautifully.

Children who are raised in an atmosphere of fear, hostility, violence or neglect have been silenced . . . Sometimes the silence is selective, some things are allowed to be talked about, some feelings are allowed expression and some clearly not. Sometimes the silence is loud; words and feelings come tumbling out but fall on deaf ears or are beaten down and stifled. Needs and feelings remain unmet and the voice becomes inaudible, right and tense, breathy and undefined . . . in essence a wounded person often survives by forfeiting his or her own voice.⁴⁰

The act of singing can be used in the most therapeutic way; it is a way of reclaiming the silence they faced. Should the victims have been silent about their abuse, the art of singing can be defiance. Given the obstacles that they face with confronting their own physicality, it is an act of bravery. The metaphoric and physical voice that Austin talks about can be saved with a creative outlet such as singing—the voice they forfeited could be found again in this reclamation of power.

NOTES

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4. Ibid.
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Scottish soprano **Lauren McQuistin** completed her undergraduate studies with Margaret Izatt at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland before moving to America to pursue a Master of Music at Indiana University under the tutelage of Carol Vaness. In Scotland she featured as a soloist with BBC Choir of the Year Les Sirenes, and performed as Donna Anna in scenes performances. A keen interpreter of Russian music, McQuistin made her Scottish Opera/McOpera Collective debut as Marfa in Shostakovich's *Rotschild's Violin*, as well as competing in and winning the Art Song class in the Sergei Leiferkus Competition for Voice in Moscow. Upon moving to America, she performed as Alice Ford and Adriana Lecouvreur in Vaness's Opera workshop, and she made her IU principal debut in 2016 as the title role of Florencia in the Jacob's School of Music production of *Florencia en el Amazonas*. She then went on to perform Countess Almaviva in *Le nozze di Figaro* with Bloomingvoce, in Bloomington. During this time she was awarded district winner in the Metropolitan Opera National Council auditions in St Louis and Nashville.

Prior to studying at the Yale School of Music, with Doris Yarick-Cross, she performed Donna Elvira (*Don Giovanni*) with the Center for Opera Studies in Italy, in Sulmona Italy. Upon arrival at the Yale School of Music she performed as title role of Lucrezia Borgia and the Prima Donna in *Ariadne auf Naxos* in their scenes production, as well as First Lady in *The Magic Flute*, a role she performed in full that spring, and covered with Central City Opera, where she a studio artist. Additionally, in her first year at Yale she performed Strauss's *Vier letzte Lieder* with Yale Symphony Orchestra, as well as Handel's *Messiah* with Hartford Symphony. Her scenes performances in her final year included Female Chorus in *The Rape of Lucretia* and Elisabetta in *Roberto Devereux*. Her most recent performance was as Tatyana in *Eugene Onegin*. Ms. McQuistin was the recipient of the Phyllis Curtin Career Entry Prize, whose purpose is to assist in launching the career of a graduating voice student who demonstrates exceptional talent as an artist and promise for professional success.

She is also a passionate teacher, focusing on emotional and physical health. She presented her research on The Effects of Childhood Sexual Abuse at the Indiana University International New Voice Teachers Symposium in 2017.

Serene, I fold my hands and wait,
Nor care for wind nor tide nor sea;
I rave no more 'gainst time or fate,
For lo! my own shall come to me.
I stay my haste, I make delays—
For what avails this eager pace?
I stand amid the eternal ways
And what is mine shall know my face.
Asleep, awake, by night or day,
The friends I seek are seeking me,
No wind can drive my bark astray
Nor change the tide of destiny.
What matter if I stand alone?
I wait with joy the coming years;
My heart shall reap where it has sown,
And garner up its fruit of tears.
The waters know their own, and draw
The brook that springs in yonder height;
So flows the good with equal law
Unto the soul of pure delight.
The stars come nightly to the sky;
The tidal wave unto the sea;
Nor time, nor space, nor deep, nor high,
Can keep my own away from me.

"Waiting," John Burroughs