How Do You Teach Voice? Six Vital Nonmusical Teaching Principles

H. Conor Angell



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INTRODUCTION

URING ALL OF MY YEARS IN school studying to be a university voice teacher, I thought a lot about the question, "How do you sing correctly?", but I almost forgot to answer the question, "How do you teach voice?" Music education researcher Kelly Parkes wrote the following about me (and the hosts of people like me who begin university voice teaching after years of schooling):

If we accept that the role of an applied faculty member is that of performer and teacher, where does his teacher education come from? In other words, where has he learned to become a teacher? . . . The standards for becoming a music teacher in P-12 public schools are clearly laid out, defined, tested and licensed either through certification or an alternate method. However, the path for becoming an applied music teacher is less clear, less tangible, and often not supported in the current conservatory-like system in North America. ¹

There is considerable variance in doctoral voice curricula; inevitably, some programs do a better job than others of preparing students for certain aspects of a faculty job. However, doctoral voice programs generally tend to be oriented toward educating singers regarding *what* to teach (voice technique) more than *how* to teach (methodology). My BM, MM, and DM degrees are all in vocal performance—the most common qualification for college applied teaching, besides a handful of voice pedagogy doctoral programs available. Voice faculty members may well complete doctorates without having undertaken any academic study of educational theory or psychology. Even if they have received some instruction in *how* to teach (doctoral programs sometimes include a course in College Teaching and Learning, or Music in Higher Education, or a Voice Teaching Practicum), they may enter their first year of teaching applied lessons with a large grab bag of performance skills, and not many teaching skills.

ELABORATING ON THE ISSUE

Numerous articles and books deal expertly with what content to teach in a voice lesson, and these are crucial materials; it is critical that new voice teachers add to their understanding of the technical aspects of pedagogy. When I was relatively new to college teaching, for example, master teacher Scott McCoy helped me to see, with characteristic humor and directness, that I

Journal of Singing, November/December 2019 Volume 76, No. 2, pp. 127–135 Copyright © 2019 National Association of Teachers of Singing was "bowing down at the altar of breath." Despite having completed a terminal degree in voice, I treated virtually all vocal issues as if they were breathing problems, rather than using a more comprehensive, nuanced diagnostic method. I was not really addressing the students' educational needs. I was using an applied teaching method with which I had been taught, failing to draw immediately applicable tools from the advanced voice pedagogy classes I had taken. John Nix writes,

Unfortunately, comparatively few teacher training programs specifically guide young teachers in how to diagnose technical vocal problems in students and how to develop strategies for solving these problems. Instead, they dwell on comparative methodology— what are the merits of the Italian School compared to the German School, or how do Miller's vocalises differ from Coffin's?

While new applied faculty members are likely to have weaknesses in their technical and procedural knowledge, it is not within the scope of this article to present a list of areas in which new teachers might lack voice knowledge, but rather to point out some of the teaching methodologies and "soft skills" that could assist them.

Parkes states that performance students do not have room in their curricula for more learning units, as the requisite performing skill level is very high.³ However, one should not assume that one knows how to teach simply because one has been taught. Using the analogy of dentistry to comment on voice teaching, she writes, "one may have had many fillings over the course of a lifetime, but a patient is certainly not ready to perform this procedure."4 National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) guidelines for a Doctorate in Performance describe competencies in performance, historical and theoretical knowledge, and repertory and literature, along with the statement "additional studies in pedagogy are recommended." 5 While some doctoral programs have a robust pedagogy component, a "pedagogy" course can quickly become concerned with nonpedagogic topics such as voice science, vocal anatomy, vocal function, comparative surveys of texts, and possibly some laryngology/singing health specialization, without engaging educational strategies such as "diagnostic and formative assessment, activating prior knowledge, scaffolding, cooperative learning, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation,

feedback, summative assessment, student-centered learning, and goal setting."6

Since the 1990s, important contributions have been made to the discipline called The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) and the concept of "learner-centered teaching." Ernest Boyer's 1990 book Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate, Alison King's 1993 essay "From Sage on the Stage to Guide on the Side," and Maryellen Weimer's 2002 book Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice, critiqued the ivory tower and challenged faculty members to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge, rather than prioritizing their own isolated scholarship or their brilliant lecturing. Subsequently, the lecture style of teaching has begun to decline significantly in popularity, as it is sometimes negatively viewed as a form of teachercentered showing off. Incorporating psychologist Albert Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory (regarding the power a person perceives to accomplish one's goals), learnercentered teaching changes the balance of power by adjusting the role of the teacher to be the role of facilitator, who equips the students with learning skills rather than covering content.⁷ Learner-centered teaching has been described as similar to coaching or midwifing, in that it empowers students so that the responsibility for learning rests with them.8 Since applied instruction is different from classroom teaching, it is helpful to consider what might be the voice teacher's version of excessively lecture-heavy teaching. It could involve excessively telling students how to sound, or showing them how they should sound by demonstrating (an even more directly intrusive approach)—methods that do not fit with the learner-centered principle, "teachers do less telling so that students can do more discovering."9

Lecturing itself is not the problem, as Bain demonstrates in *What the Best College Teachers Do*; lecturing can be used in a learner-centered way, as can other teaching styles. ¹⁰ It is not necessary to list the many faulty practices that result in teacher-dominated sessions, ranging from the abusive (verbal or physical) to the inept. Sadly, many of us have had experiences with supposed voice experts whose method of "teaching" was to demonstrate sounds endlessly and then say "cantare così." This example is clearly teacher-dominated, as it does not even acknowledge who the student is or help the student understand the educational objective. It

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simply tells the student to sound like someone else. Maryellen Weimer states that classroom habits often reveal how much professors like being the center of action in the classroom, unable to "pass up the opportunity to show our stuff."11 She notes her own tendency to enjoy storytelling in front of her classes, meanwhile acknowledging that it should not be forbidden to lecture or tell stories—sometimes they make the points easier to understand and remember. However, "it's about honestly analyzing my motives for telling a story and making sure I'm telling it to facilitate learning, not because I want to see if I can still make people laugh."12 She goes on to say that the facilitative role seems less glamorous and important than the traditional "sage" role, perhaps because it removes teachers from the center of the educational galaxy, allowing the students to be the stars. Being a facilitator rather than a sage means a choice against codependent relationships: when the voice student is expected to develop critical listening and discerning skills, she has more responsibility than she would if she had to run to the teacher to make all decisions. 13 A critical learning environment has been created in the voice studio when the teacher does not simply give answers but also raises transformative questions.

Considering these principles, I wish I could speak a few words to the younger version of myself about what I could have done differently as I started teaching voice. Specifically in the extramusical components of applied teaching, I would have profited from some student-centered "best practices" that I have been learning in the years since, from colleagues and from scholarship. As someone still relatively new to my voice teaching journey, I am not in a place to tell voice teachers in detail how to run their lessons. The following are simply guiding principles that researchers and experienced NATS members have provided.

1. If you demonstrate during your lessons, do so with a clear, specific reason.

While teachers have differing opinions about the degree to which demonstration or vocal modeling should be used in voice lessons, it is clear that modeling should be for the sake of illustrating a specific function—for example, a registration choice, vowel adjustment, phrasing concept, etc.—and not for the sake of impressing the student. If the teacher sings the student's songs for the

student, the teacher gives a defeating illustration that he or she is more advanced than the student is; and, if the teacher has demonstrated anything incorrectly, he or she has further confused the matter. Yet a teacher who has recently finished three vocal performance degrees is likely to do what he or she knows best: perform at/for the student. As Curtis Smith describes in "Too Much of a Good Thing: The Dangers of Over-Demonstrating in a Piano Lesson," it can be counterproductive for a teacher to model the "correct" version of a skill repeatedly throughout a lesson. He writes, "It is my suspicion that new teachers rely heavily on demonstration, primarily because their own playing is the only thing they know they can trust."14 Smith recommends using demonstration only to introduce an idea, after which students need to think for themselves rather than relying on and mimicking the teacher's physicality, mannerisms, and personal interpretations.¹⁵

The fact that demonstration is misused does not mean that it cannot be used well. Studies have shown that teacher modeling for student imitation is an effective teaching strategy, although most studies are with instrumentalists and not with advanced singers. 16 Acknowledging that teachers disagree about the merits of demonstrating sung tone in lessons, former NATS president and pedagogue William Vennard described healthy demonstration as different from having a student mimic a model tone: "The teacher must provide a model that will pull the student out of his fault. This may not be a 'good' tone."17 A male teacher might find some benefit in being able to demonstrate to a student the difference between a CT-dominant sound versus a TA-dominant sound on the treble staff. This doesn't mean that his "heady" timbre will necessarily have the same sound that a soprano student might strive for in her "heady" timbre, but he can identify a specific vocal choice for the student.

Teachers should remember that while demonstration is often the fastest way to get a result from the student, it does not foster independence, as mimicry does not necessarily involve a comprehension of function. ¹⁸ Teachers who encourage their students to be independent learners are aligning with the Zone of Proximal Development, a concept pioneered by psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934), which he defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by inde-

pendent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers."19 Vygotsky's theory promotes the use of scaffolding devices in teaching: students need the scaffolding to reach beyond their current capabilities, and the problemsolving scaffolding can be removed when it is no longer needed. Applying Vygostky's theory to applied teaching, Richard Kennell describes six scaffolding teaching strategies: Recruitment, Reduction of Degrees of Freedom, Direction Maintenance, Marking Critical Features, Frustration Control, and Demonstration.²⁰ These are presented in order of least intrusive to most intrusive. Recruitment, the least intrusive, would be a strategy to enlist the problem solver's interest, such as, "Do you recognize that interval from your study of tritones in theory class?" A Reduction of Degrees of Freedom, also not highly intrusive, might be asking the student, "Could you please try that phrase using an [a] vowel instead of the text?" Demonstrating vocally how the phrase should sound, which is the most intrusive method, should be used only when another less intrusive method will not work.

Music education researcher Estelle Jorgensen in *The* Art of Teaching Music lists demonstration as one option, alongside the instructional styles of exposition, interrogation, motivation, and evaluating. She emphasizes that after watching the teacher's demonstration, students need the opportunity to "work out their own ways of approaching this music and to bring their own personalities to bear on it."21 One of my students exclaimed, when he finally grasped a concept I had been struggling to teach him for almost two years, "Oh, I'm supposed to use the sound of my own voice? I had thought I was supposed to sound like you." Master teacher Mary Saunders Barton explains, "If you know what you want them to do, you can find creative ways to get the results without actually modeling the sounds."22 The student is studying with the teacher because the teacher is qualified to teach her; she does not need the teacher's singing to remind her constantly that she is studying with a great singer.

The legendary pianist and teacher Menahem Pressler relates, "There was a time when I used to always play for my students, until one day one of my favorite students was playing, and an old professor who was sitting next to me said 'Menahem! You've succeeded in making a little

Menahem here!' I didn't like that at all. I didn't want them to copy me, not at all. I wanted them to understand it and to do it their way. Better, less good, with the understanding of what does the piece say, because the content is the most important aspect. So from that time on, I started less to show to my students. I started more to be able to talk about it. And that was not so easily done. You have to learn to do it."²³

2. Teach them according to their actual state, not your preconceptions.

"Conor, you have to stop teaching yourself," my master teacher told me after one of the lessons he observed me teach during the NATS Intern Program. I had not taught the student according to what she manifested in her singing; I had taught her according to my fixed concept of "what is important to know about the voice" (and what I personally have had the hardest time learning about singing). The issues that are hard for one student are easy for the next student, who has different challenges. Executive coaching theory provides useful principles for voice teachers on active listening.

Typically, as we start listening to others, our own inner dialogue begins to kick in. "I've been in that same situation too," "I hope he gets to the point quickly," "I wonder what time I'll get home today." Our inner voice begins to play in our head and, if we are not careful, it interferes with our ability to listen to others as we are so busy listening to ourselves.²⁴

Avoiding the pitfalls of expressing a judgment, dismissing or making light of the student's statements, talking about oneself, admonishing the student, or giving directives, the teacher can instead lead the student into discovery by a variety of question types, including clarifying questions, open questions, limiting questions, and leading questions.²⁵

Teachers can fall into faulty listening if we impose rigid concepts regarding subjective aspects of singing. For example, when a student makes a healthy, pleasing sound and states that she feels a certain way, rather than telling her she is actually supposed to feel differently, the teacher can affirm what she says. Perhaps the teacher is used to correcting posture (or breath, vowels, registration, etc.) in first year singers, so the teacher launches into a sermon on good singing posture, assuming the

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singer needs it, when she is actually presenting good posture. The teacher should observe neutrally, prioritizing what needs to be addressed, noticing tone of voice, pauses, body language and energy. During a pedagogy practicum, I watched voice teachers giving multiple consecutive lessons. I noticed that it is possible for a teacher to get on a roll with a certain concept in a given day, and to use that concept as a panacea for all singers. One day, the teacher might start out with a student who had jaw tension, and proceed to work on jaw tension with everyone. The next week, the teacher might work with everyone on pharyngeal expansion, whether or not individuals exhibited issues in that area. Our job is to be present and give each student individualized instruction.

3. Let the singers sing.

Experts agree that experts should talk less in voice lessons. Teachers should not overwhelm students with anything—their own experience and qualifications, a plan for the student's future, or the most detailed explanation of formants and the myoelastic-aerodynamic principle. They should give the simplest and most concrete feedback rather than using jargon. According to Estelle Jorgensen, "Explaining things in music, as in other subject matter, requires prioritizing the knowledge to be passed on to the student on a 'need to know' basis, or using what I have referred to earlier as antecedence. According to this principle, material is introduced to students in such a way that we teach first what will be needed in order for the next thing to be learned successfully."26 As Scott McCoy stated an earlier Journal of Singing, "You can't learn to sing by listening to the words of wisdom spewing forth from the mouth of a master teacher; you actually must sing—a lot. Our students learn when they are singing."27 In his famous book The Inner Game of Tennis, Gallwey calls it "overteaching," when the teacher feels the need to load on complex commentary about every action in order to be worth the lesson fee; the student may be impressed but confused about what to practice as she leaves the lesson.²⁸ Renowned performer and teacher David Sabella states, "In my youth, I felt a responsibility to share the knowledge that I had with the student . . . I realize now that although I need to know all the anatomical and acoustical information (because that is my job), the student doesn't necessarily need (or want) to know any

of it."²⁹ The student also does not need to be entertained; the student is paying for the teacher to do his or her job with excellence and positivity, not to be hip, hilarious, or relatable. The teacher may be motivated by eagerness to share fascinating material, a desire to impress the student with knowledge, or a desire to establish a warm personal connection, but none of these warrants turning a singing lesson into a talking session. Students may actually listen better when the teacher's words are fewer and well chosen.

4. Acknowledge differences in your students.

Teachers should do their best to understand students' approach to life and to voice study, and tailor their instruction accordingly. Teachers might not feel that any one method of measuring students' personalities and learning styles is a perfect system, but they can surely agree with the principle that effective instruction is not one-size-fits-all. Scientific studies have not yielded an adequate evidence base to justify incorporating any one of the following methods into general educational practice, but they offer helpful strategies for teachers who are willing to acknowledge that some students will be harder to relate to than others.³⁰ Some voice teachers use the Enneagram, a personality typing system that helps them understand what motivates their students. Others find it helpful to determine their students' dominant or preferred modalities for learning-visual, auditory, or kinesthetic/tactile. Others view their students' uniqueness through the lens of Multiple Intelligences, a theory first posited in 1983 by Howard Gardner in his book Frames of Mind. Describing seven "intelligences" (linguistic, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and spatial), Gardner states that an intelligence is not a learning style, but rather "a capacity, with its component processes, that is geared to a specific content in the world."31 A teacher might find that a student can apply a high interpersonal or bodily-kinesthetic intelligence to his or her voice study (for example, connecting easily with the relational dimensions of the text or the physicality of the singing technique) without demonstrating exceptional musical intelligence. Gardner offers a broad, inspiring philosophy for learning environments.

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Differences among youngsters are taken seriously, knowledge about differences is shared with children and parents, children gradually assume responsibility for their own learning, and materials that are worth knowing are presented in ways that afford each child the maximum opportunity to master those materials and to show others (and themselves) what they have learned and understood.³²

Equipped with this kind of thinking, a voice teacher can recognize that personality type, cultural background, body type, and mental and emotional development affect how each singer thinks about singing. Paying attention and keeping notes on what seems to produce positive change in the student (for example, one student likes to "picture the space for the tone becoming tall," another has a phrase that propels her to remember what to do, another touches his cheeks to remind himself of a certain way of singing) will help singers find a personal connection with the pursuit of good singing. Teachers might find that they tend to teach in ways that align with their own subjective, empirical experience of singing, which can seem foreign to their students. A voice pedagogue with a flexible instructive style will "try to get students to become independent learners so that they get thirsty for it, and then they will get better because they will want to."33

5. Balance challenge and support.

The student didn't come to the lesson for the teacher to tell her she is perfect. On the other hand, if the teacher moves from one technical challenge to the next without providing any affirmation that the student accomplished something, she will feel defeated. Effective formative feedback acknowledges that the intellectual aspect of thinking is not separate from the motivational and emotional aspects.³⁴ A simple affirmation of an achieved goal (the ribs stayed expanded, or the tongue remained free) will go a long way in raising the student's confidence and self-efficacy. Even if the teacher gives a disclaimer along the lines of "I'm not criticizing you, just your voice," every correction comes through an emotional filter, since voice is tied to identity. College students are at an age in which they are sensitive to external validation as they search to establish an internal sense of identity. As a first-year college teacher, I thought I was being an expert if I could find something wrong with every sound

students made. Scott McCoy urges a very different path: "Give them the opportunity for self-correction. As often as not, students are aware of vocal issues that crop up while singing a vocalise and, given the opportunity, will fix the problem on their own. When you absolutely *must* stop for commentary, focus on a single concept." Is singers are not advanced, the teacher can give them a very basic task and make sure they both accomplish it and know they have accomplished it, instead of setting unrealistic goals for them or failing to acknowledge their accomplishment. By finding at least one simple success to celebrate in each lesson, both student and teacher curb the tendency toward impatience, accepting that change is happening and is gradual.

Master teacher Barbara Doscher contrasts two major points of view about how to motivate students. She criticizes the belief that continual criticism and/or comparison of one performer with another are powerful, appropriate motivating forces. "This orientation assumes that those aspiring to be performers must be able to tolerate such adverse working conditions because the field is competitive. The opposing view, and the one to which I subscribe, is that learning takes place faster and the student retains new concepts more easily if the environment is encouraging and supportive." She continues, "there is enough self-criticism going on already. Your task is to teach these neurotic singers how to make a better sound." Furthermore, "each person's ego is laid bare, so to speak, and the successful voice teacher must be sensitive to that naked psyche."36

Master teacher Jeanette LoVetri refers to teachers' response to their whole-person responsibilities as their Pianoside Manner*. The teacher must have faith in the student's potential, keep a reasonable pace, and acknowledge with kindness the difficulty and vulnerability of what the singer is doing. Treating the student with respect, the teacher can give honest assessments—not telling students they are terrible *or* incredible, but providing positive and measured instruction to move forward. Another facet of this honest approach is being open about what the teacher is working on. The teacher can say, "that exercise was to release the tightness in the back of the tongue on your [i] vowel," rather than shrouding his or her purposes in mystery, as the holder of the secret vocal masterplan.

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6. Be humble.

Being humble means, among other things, teachers should admit when they don't know things, allow students to explore styles that interest them when possible, and allow students to express uniqueness in their sound and opinions. Teachers should not feel embarrassed when students want to work on pieces and styles that teachers don't know. As master teacher Mary Saunders Barton gently states, "It can be disconcerting to be confronted with the need to support a kind of singing one has never even tried." 38 Inevitably, teachers will have students who want to sing repertoire that isn't the teachers' performing specialty. The teacher should not pretend to be an expert, but can say, "This style is not my specialty; you are welcome to sing it for me, and I will give you the feedback I can." Then the teacher can make a point to learn more about that style, eschewing simplistic falsehoods such as "classical technique works for all styles," and "nonclassical styles will hurt your voice." The teacher should not assume that the same technique works for all styles. If the teacher has only sung classical music (as was the case with me), he should remember to state specifically to the student that the voice will need to be used differently for different styles, and that the student needs to practice more than one way to produce voice. There are obviously reasons to place limits on what and how students can sing—juries might require certain stylistic repertoire, and the teacher should not encourage the singer to sing in a way that he or she believes would damage the student's voice. Additionally, there may be certain styles about which the teacher needs to state honestly that he does not currently feel informed enough to instruct. However, we teachers are guilty of laziness or arrogance if we refuse to become familiar enough with a different musical style to teach it, simply because it is not our own preference.

Similarly, it is arrogant to convey to our students that our way of teaching is superior to others, or to try to "stamp" our singers in a way that will remind people of us, requiring them to sing only in a certain style or with certain characteristics, giving undue input about their personal lives, or treating their successes as our own doing. Jeannette LoVetri advocates teaching toward a "balanced" voice, which "is clear and consistent but not

machine-like. It can sing in a variety of styles as needed. The singer is instantly recognizable and feels satisfied with the sound and the feeling of singing."39 This concept of allowing the singer to sound like herself (albeit a constantly improving version of herself) helps counter the vocal confusion that can result from the newness of the sounds a singer makes in her training. Carla LeFevre explains that for voice students a classically trained singer may sound foreign to them. "Often my young students react to the first tones they sing with abdominal support and a low laryngeal position with such comments as 'That's really weird,' or 'That sounds fake.' In time, most voice students learn to accept the new sound." Throughout this learning process, the student needs to be reminded regularly to celebrate the unique features of her instrument. Barbara Doscher writes, "If during their training, singers are encouraged to be individualistic and their voices are described as unique, singing will enrich their lives, regardless of whether they make a living that way or not. We must allow each person, within his or her own present capabilities and emotional disposition, to have a personal and individual vision."40

The humble teacher does not act as though it is the student's fault when an exercise or instruction does not accomplish the desired result. Phrases such as, "No, you still want to lift your shoulders to breathe," or "You're going to have to decide to stop dropping your palate/ singing too loud," blame the singer as if she were trying to do the wrong thing. Neutral language takes the emotional baggage out of the scenario—not shaming or praising, but simply talking about the body (not the person) and using positive instruction: "Let's ask/ allow your head to balance effortlessly on your spine," or "After repetitions in practice sessions, new muscle memory will allow the jaw to move with more freedom." When students don't meet expectations—for example, in the perennial problem of inadequate practice—it is better to leave emotion out of the discussion with the student as well. If the teacher tells students that it is frustrating or disappointing when they don't practice, it seems as though the discussion is about the teacher's feelings, not about students' progress and grade. When choosing which emotions to reveal, the teacher should choose to show the enthusiasm and joy he or she feels in students' successes and potential.

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Whether the artist-teacher has had a long ambition to teach voice or has stumbled into the discipline as an unexpected destination along the journey of performing, he or she should use more than trial and error when it comes to methodologies and strategies for moving a student from point A to point B. The successful artist-teacher possesses not only comprehensive musicianship, but also comprehensive pedagogy. This helps singers find tools for ongoing vocal growth and a clearer, more focused sense of their vocal identity and goals. ⁴¹ The teacher will facilitate students' discovery of a voice and a love for singing that is their own, not something the teacher has imposed.

NOTES

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Blow, blow, thou winter wind,

Thou art not so unkind

As man's ingratitude;

Thy tooth is not so keen,

Because thou art not seen,

Although thy breath be rude.

Heigh-ho! sing, heigh-ho! unto the green holly:

Most friendship is feigning, most loving mere folly:

Then, heigh-ho, the holly!

This life is most jolly.

Freeze, freeze, thou bitter sky,

That dost not bite so nigh

As benefits forgot:

Though thou the waters warp,

Thy sting is not so sharp

As friend remembered not.

Heigh-ho!, sing, heigh-ho! . . .

Wm. Shakespeare, As You Like It, Act II, Scene 7

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