

Richard Dale Sjoerdsma

# Connect With Your Voice



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**B**Y THIS TIME, AFTER REPEATED REMINDERS, one hopes that all NATS members and JOS readers are aware that April 16 marks World Voice Day and will actively participate in some meaningful way. You may recall a promise offered in my March/April 2012 “Editor’s Commentary” that each corresponding issue of the *Journal of Singing* will announce the occasion on its front cover, and I further pledge to draw attention to it in my column. It doesn’t seem possible to overemphasize the importance of this event, when all voice practitioners throughout this terrestrial ball have a unique opportunity to celebrate the gift of voice—and, by extension, that of song. Two years ago, I recounted the origin and history of WVD, and suggested some ways for its observance.<sup>1</sup> It is not necessary to duplicate that material here; interested readers may find considerably more detailed information online.

Recent World Voice Day themes have been interestingly varied, while preserving the common thread of celebrating voice.

- 2008 Let Your Voice Be Heard
- 2009 Invest in Your Voice
- 2010 Love Your Voice
- 2011 We Share a Voice
- 2012 Your Voice Counts

I find the theme for 2013, *Connect With Your Voice*, especially inspired, because it finds application on so many levels, particularly for singers.

We singers are creatures of curious contradiction. On the one hand, we often so completely connect with our voices that they are, in fact, our identities. I remember, for example, early in my career, having already experienced some success as a high lyric baritone, the voice (There! I said it! More about that below.)—along with several voice teachers—indicated a move toward tenor. The transition period between baritone and tenor, about which little seems to have been written,<sup>2</sup> was rather traumatic, as I didn’t fit comfortably into either world. I had lost identity, and, concomitantly, self-confidence and self-esteem. Further, as many readers are aware, I currently am in a program of head-neck radiation therapy, and I am experiencing temporary weakness in the voice, along with some loss of quality. This and other factors that impact the voice have for my entire life—both positively and negatively, for better or worse—affected my self-concept, so closely is it tied up with being a singer.

On the other hand, as betrayed above, I and other singers with whom I’ve discussed this phenomenon, tend to disassociate by referring to our apparatus as “the voice.” I suppose it is because of the vagaries, vicissitudes, and delicacy of the instrument, and the fact that it resides inside us, that we feel a little less vulnerable when we objectify it.

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The above may be described as visceral connections with the voice; I suspect they are altogether natural and common to most singers. Perhaps we can balance the equation, however, with a more intellectual approach. While mulling this matter, and at the same time proofing final copy for the January/February JOS, I received three inadvertent Christmas gifts from contributors to that issue that have direct bearing on the problem. (Remember that I'm writing this in early December.) While it is true that each of us possesses unique vocal equipment in its physiologic characteristics, acoustic qualities, and technical/artistic training, it is important to understand that it is a product of many other factors. In his poem, "Sanglots," Apollinaire writes,

We know that within us many people breathe  
who came from afar and are united behind our brows.<sup>3</sup>

This is true, of course, for everyone in terms of biological, psychological, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual makeup, but nowhere is it more *a propos* than with singers. Scott McCoy elaborated on this idea in an excellent "Voice Pedagogy" column, concluding that "in the end, you are the product of everyone with whom you have studied."<sup>4</sup> It seems to me that this kind of vocal self-awareness leads to a more healthy, humble attitude toward one's instrument.

Another level of connecting with your voice involves an intimacy of acquaintance and understanding, in terms of health, physiology, and technology. As to the former, Sataloff and Hawkshaw, in a discussion concerning misdiagnoses, write,

This common and understandable error is hard to avoid unless the singer has had a baseline comprehensive voice evaluation and knows his or her laryngeal findings when "healthy."<sup>5</sup>

Voice hygiene is essentially a personal responsibility. Further, an intimate understanding of one's voice presumes a comprehensive knowledge of its anatomy and physiology. And this means not only conversance with musculature, tissue, cartilage, bone, etc., but also with technology that graphically illustrates function. Many tend to shy away from the latter, irrationally claiming a disconnect between science and art, but, in fact, risking becoming relegated to irrelevancy in the process.

Finally, dear reader, a vital aspect of connecting with our voice is a reversal of direction from the forgoing, where the focus is oriented internally, to an external one. We of course need to connect with our voice to our hearers. Regarding this particular application of our WVD 2013 theme of connecting to others, I find it entirely serendipitous that in this issue I am privileged to publish a guest editorial by Thomas Hampson. This eminent singer/artist and indefatigable proponent of (especially American) art song is an unparalleled example, having connected with his voice to untold thousands of listeners through his performances and recordings.

As singers, our understanding of our own voice is of little value until we express our art. This opens up an area too vast to be detailed here, but about which a great deal has been written. Perhaps one can extend the familiar metaphor of the tree falling in the forest: Can a song be a song without having been sung? One's connection to the *act* of singing is realized in the *art* of singing. Knowledge is one factor—history, literature, languages, styles, form, diction—but spirit is another. In order to really connect with our voice to others, one must possess the spirit of the poet (*Dichtungsvermögen*), along with that charismatic power of communication that probably cannot be taught. A number of years ago, prior to one of my European concert tours, a friend sent me a note with this imperative: "Give them your heart, your song." The ultimate connection, that, indeed is why we are here.

## NOTES

1. Richard Dale Sjoerdsma, "World Voice Day 2011," *Journal of Singing* 67, no. 4 (March/April 2011): 383–384.
2. The only book of which I am aware is of considerable vintage. Paul Bruns, *Bariton oder Tenor? Ein lösbares Problem der Stimmbildung auf Grund neuer Entdeckungen* (Berlin-Groß Lichterfelde: Chr. Friedrich Vieweg G. m. b. H., 1910).
3. Peter Low, "Far From Banal—Poulenc's *Banalités*," *Journal of Singing* 69, no. 3 (January/February 2013): 295.
4. Scott McCoy, "Teamwork," *Journal of Singing* 69, no. 3 (January/February 2013): 297.
5. Robert T. Sataloff and Mary J. Hawkshaw, "Singers: What is Normal?" *Journal of Singing* 69, no. 3 (January/February 2013): 301.