

Beyond Pedagogy: Working With the Challenged Singer

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Beyond Pedagogy: Working with Singing Performer with Severe Disability

“When I am singing, the joy that it gives me is that I feel that I am part of a universe that has kind of been closed to people with physical limitations. When I am singing I feel that I am already involved in that community and that I am contributing something that is unique from what other people are used to.”

The performing vocalist works with air, heart, throat, diaphragm, tongue, guts and various other organs with the goal of giving sound everything: resonance, warmth, presence and clarity. With an ever-increasing need to instruct students with special needs, whether they be physical, medical or emotional, teachers are challenged to consider and attend to a variety of issues. Obstructions in the vocal folds, anatomy of the singer, temperament, diet, energy level and many other factors may impede the instruction. A combination of pedagogy, technique and establishment of emotional relationship between teacher and student can have a positive impact on student progress and achievement for singers with disabilities. My objective as educator is to explore the effects of singing training on respiratory function, voice, mood, and quality of life for singers with severe disabilities such as quadriplegia, deafness, loss of hearing, blindness, lack of lung capacity, and muscular dystrophy. This paper is part of my ongoing research on the topic of vocal performers and musicians who perform with severe disabilities and includes profiles of other musical performers including a professor of music and international flutist who is deaf in one ear, and of a regional blues singer with collapsing lung, who is currently on a waiting list for a lung transplant. The paper serves as an introduction to the topic and as a reminder for teaching in general, one-on-one teaching, supervision and mentoring and other positive

effects stemming from tailoring a course of education for the purpose of expediting the education of a positive and keen vocal performer who happens to be visibly disabled. It is with this insight and permission that I have chosen to share his life and part of my study into vocal studies with him and other disabled singers in mind. This paper is the first among a group of papers on my research of this topic.

I became aware of the importance of developing special teaching approaches while gaining worldwide teaching experience with as many as fifty special needs singers over a thirty year period from Finland, France, Germany, Africa, Spain, Austria, Romania and beyond. The vast majority of these students were actively seeking and pursuing vocal performance careers. As the special needs of these singers varied and as the number of severely disabled vocal students increased, it became necessary for me to customize each course of study. For those at the university level I sought to design successive stages of progress for their first-third year private study curriculum. Each course of study consisted of a thirteen-week course. General profiles of disabled singers of my research have included the following characteristics:

1. their average age is 21, although most severely disabled are 4-10 years older.
2. most have some singing experience either through church affiliation, or prior secondary/pre-university training either in classical, pop or jazz vocal studies.

Because of these factors customized approaches of instruction vary. Overall, my methodologies are designed to create a blank page for their creative growth...to awaken them to a far off essential curiosity, necessary to discover the quality of freedom in their music making. Teaching goals include some variation of the following:

1. to strip away learned behavior patterns which did not belong to them
2. to seed the roots of creative singing by means of improvisation
3. to seed the roots of creative singing by means of song-writing
4. to seed the roots of creative singing by means of fantasy role-play
5. to seed the roots of creative singing by the analysis of singing with the body
6. to eliminate everything which might hinder from rediscovering life at its most authentic

More often than not I teach students who want to perform non-classical

music. Often black cultural vocal influences found in song themes and popular singing styles are taught in the vocal technique study of melisma and mordents of gospel, soul and rhythm and blues repertoire, which may inspire the singer. I draw upon my success as a vocal and acting performer on the international stage of vocal music my combination of classical and non-classical training and experience to work with each singer.

A Case Study of a Singing Performer with a Severe Disability

Improving vocal development in one such student with muscular dystrophy became the focal point in my research from the period of 2006-2012. Paul Bhekimpilo Tshuma came to me as a working and studying vocal performer, composer, choir director, writer and became a music major at Concordia University in Montreal, Quebec. Paul was born in September of 1978, in the city of Bulawayo, Africa, in the country of Zimbabwe. My instructional design was foremost about guiding Paul's self perception and in increasing and implementing a strong sense of self esteem and empowerment for him when performing. Of walking Paul says, "I have never walked in my entire life because of my physical disability which is Muscular Dystrophy."

Early Education & the Core of his Artistic Expression & Vision

Paul attended King George IV Memorial School, an English school in Zimbabwe from 1986 to 1996. During these years, he developed an interest in writing poetry after being inspired by a public speaking competition. "When I started out I didn't know that I had it in me until my early first year in high school when I had to be in a public speaking competition that is when I came in 2nd place in a competition where I competed against 15 schools back in Zimbabwe. That inspired me. That's when I realized there was something powerful in poetry and that as I recited the poem that another author wrote I came to relive his moment...his life. That became so powerful and I thought that this was the best way I could bring people into my own personal space and tell them how I feel. And it is that which really drove me to poetry writing. Competing against those 15 schools coming in second place encouraged me enormously. From that day, I was really interested in writing, and the best way to express my thoughts was through poetry. It was a poetry reading in public

speaking entitled The Bells. I can't remember the author, but it was really a nice beautiful poem. It was like music. After writing my first few poems, such as, "Is it a Forced Matter" and "My Talent", my desire to write poems slowly diminished. I stopped for a while because I was lacking the inspiration and began to find writing to be a tedious chore. Two years later I met a new friend in school, who had an intense passion for writing poems. After reading a couple of his poems, I was motivated by his work, and returned to my pen and paper. From that day till today, I have never stopped writing poems.

University Vocal Study Begins

Paul began studies at the university level, describing his experience.

Tshuma: Yes, I can remember clearly the first. There were two auditions that I took with you Dr. Brown. At the first audition ...I knew it was successful. I wasn't sure whether I had done a good job because I wasn't really sure of my voice and what was expected of me. And right then after I sang you told me that it would really be nice to work with you and if you got accepted I would like to take you under my wings, you know. And while I was still waiting for the application to be accepted into the program, the first time I was not accepted. But I never gave up because. I wanted to be your student and to really learn from you based on the feedbacks that I had gotten from friends who had been under your wings, you know. So I pressed on. Like I've said – it is the mind that controls. Plus I had that ambition. So I pressed on and came in for the second audition. That's when I 'came in' and I was accepted as an independent student for three years.

Brown: In that audition do you remember what you sang?

Tshuma: Oh, I know in the first audition I sang a song by Kirk Franklin.

Brown: And he's a gospel composer? Yes. Do you remember the title?

Tshuma: Um, I think it was My Life is in your hands

Brown: That Is a very recognizable Kirk Franklin piece.

Vocal Study

Our work began with Paul to improve his passaggio, between his low notes and head tones, and to increase fluidity and volume was our technical aim. A baritone with a wide vocal timbre, Paul's tone was clearer in his higher notes. The gap from low to high, however, required much more clarity of tone throughout his vocal registration. Paul loved gospel, jazz, R&B and connected well with black vocal artists such as Stevie Wonder, Kirk Franklin, Marvin Gaye, and Donny Hathaway. I exposed him to crooners such as Nat King Cole, Bing Crosby, Andy Williams, Tony Bennett and Frank Sinatra. These artists were chosen to 'even out' his sound, essentially toning down his vibrato and melismatic tendencies. Gradually as this skill set 'fell into place', added singing stylists included Bill Withers, Gregory Porter, Luther Vandross, Al Jarreau and others for a combined vocal effort. In Paul's case a customized song and artist list was assigned improved and targeted listening in an effort to guide his singer's mindset and ears. Songs included: *Feelings, My Funny Valentine, My One and Only Love, Overjoyed, For All We Know, Day By Day, Never Let Me Go, The Shadow of Your Smile, The Very Thought of You, Sunshine of My Life, You are So Beautiful, Tracks of My Tears, I Have Dreamed, Stormy Weather, I Cant Get Started, Sophisticated Lady, I Who Have Nothing, You're Nearer, and With a Song in My Heart. Doodlin, Peace, and Everytime We Say Goodbye.*

Tshuma: Poetry has been a place where I can actually express and explain what I really feel deep is inside of me. All of my emotions. It allows me to really let out what is bothering me in the sense that I wouldn't be verbally to tell somebody about. But on paper its easier for me to explain that and when put together with music kind of paint an image that everyone can relate to when I sing out and it becomes alive compared to just reading it. You can only imagine. But when it is in music people can take that journey with you that you have impacted.

Brown: That's wonderful. And you started out in your life speaking a bit.

Tshuma: When I started out I didn't know that I had it in my until my early first year in high school when I had to be in a pub speaking competition that is when I came in 2nd place in a competition where I competed against 15 schools back in Zimbabwe. That inspired me. That's when I realized there was something powerful in poetry and that as I recited the poem that another author wrote I

came to relive his moment...his life. That became so powerful and I thought that this was the best way I could bring people into my own personal space and tell them how I feel. And it is that which really drove me to poetry writing. I was already singing, but I didn't have proper tools to help me support my vocals in a way that I could produce it the way that I am able to do it right now. It was a poetry reading in public speaking entitled The Bells but I can't remember the author. It was really a nice beautiful poem. It was like music.

Encouraging Creativity in Singer with Disability through Writing

Singers tend to perform better when they have written it. In Paul's case songwriting discussions and assignment included theoretical and emotional discussion often resulted in a stronger development of ownership for the performance, and increased his confidence and overall stage presence. Writing, whether in songs or poetry, served as a stimulant for him.

Tshuma: Poetry has been a place where I can actually express and explain what I really feel deep is inside of me. All of my emotions. It allows me to really let out what is bothering me in the sense that I wouldn't be verbally to tell somebody about. The type of poems I write are inspirational, love, encouragement, as well as personal experiences. The reason that I write poetry is because I express myself better and my purpose is to help those who may be in situations that need emotional or mental support. Even though I am studying Computer Software and Technology at McGill University in Montreal, Canada, poetry still remains my passion. In my upcoming book, I have chosen 26 inspirational poems out of 100 that I have written which I believe the topic to be something that all readers can relate to...that of self-esteem."

Questions for Discussion with Paul about Establishing *Self Esteem* for Performance Enhancement included the following:

1. Are you affected by the opinions of others in performance?
2. If so, how so? Please list a few examples.
3. Why do you worry so much about what others think?
4. What do you need to work on if you feel confident about yourself, but feel others don't?

5. What is more important how others value you or how YOU value you?
6. How do you know what they think?
7. How can you be sure?
8. Many times we think we understand how others look at us and how they think but really it is a mystery. Can you read their minds?
9. Are you concerned with getting respect from others who may have a problem with their own self-confidence?
10. Many singers roll their eyes or give a grim stare if you suggest that you are a vocal performer, poet and writer. But it seems like you have been inspired in these areas from an early age through today. What fuels you in song work?
11. Is it possible to ‘lose yourself’ in a song or to become transported to another space when singing something inspirational unlike other songs?
12. What are some examples of songs and artists who seem to have that sense of empowerment when performing?
13. What has it been like developing yourself as an artist around other vocal emerging artists?
14. Is there a particular experience or anecdote you’d like to share about feeling empowerment during your vocal development in performance through poetry and other writings and any combinations?
15. Do you start thinking about a story with an idea or image in mind when creating a poem, song, essay or combination?
16. Is there a particularly striking experience you’ve had while promoting your emerging artistic talent that you would like to share?

Guarding the Path

Developing and maintaining a healthy sense of self-esteem early might include two basic messages “I am lovable and I am worthwhile”. I found it to be fundamental to strengthening confidence for my work with Paul. The complexity was not in the words, but in the belief in the words. For a teacher to pass on positive messages during a voice lesson for psychological benefit requires creating a process that incorporates a purposeful goal with appropriate tasks for the performer.

Three Possible Ways to Turn a *Positive Message* into a belief are described in this equation: clear direct message + supportive evidence + repetition = personal belief (self esteem)

Overall Health Improvement from Singing for the Disabled Performer

While not noted specifically in this paper, it is documented that Paul's life expectancy has increased in large part due to his ability to work specifically on breathing. He demonstrated significant improvement in his projected speech intensity, and maximum phonation length. Improvement in his respiratory function, muscle strength, and recruitment was also evident. He also demonstrated an improvement in his mood as evidenced in his music appreciation and relaxation. Paul revealed the importance singing and of his passion for performance as key to his overall health. His progress through his determination, work ethic, and above all talent, provided me with a rubric of goals and outcomes from which to conduct all of my vocal performance private study courses.

Brown: Can you describe your physical condition when I first met you when you were inquiring about auditioning for the voice area at Concordia University music department.

Tshuma: Physically I thought I was capable and I was ready for the challenge physically and I was aware of what it would physically require to be involved in voice as a singer and as a person with disability singing. I came to learn is that all parts of your body are involved in your singing. So, I was ready for that challenge to discover more about my body and what I could do physically and how I could achieve the same level as a non-disabled person when it came to perform singing.

Brown: Did you get advisement from your doctor as to whether this was a safe route for you?

Tshuma: Not necessarily. The only information that I had in mind was that the doctor told me how much strength my lungs had and from there I could really tell how far I could push myself if I had to sing and do a lot of breath control and in what part of my body and how I could use that part of my body to perform in a normal way.

Brown: But do you go to a doctor regularly?

Tshuma: Yes.

Brown: Do you have a physiotherapist?

Tshuma: (laugh) No, I was ready for the challenge and when I took on the challenge, I told myself that the mind is more powerful. It can control everything. So, that if I put my mind on it I knew that I would overcome my all my limitations that I have cause it is my mind that controls what I am capable of doing.

Brown: And are you improved in any way as a result of performing vocally?

Tshuma: ...vocal wise I would say yes, I have...improved. Physically... it is always stable.

Documentation of Paul's Voice in Performance

Paul's success was documented on two occasions in three songs: a) during a jury performance examination, and b) in a winning vocal symposium performance competition. These three selections represent song assignments from shows written by some of Broadway's and jazz' most talented and admired authors and composers. In each case the vocalist exhibited exceptional vocal strength, stamina and performance savvy with exciting and edgy staged song selections that challenged him artistically causing his audiences to sit up and take notice.

>Film 1 (Vocal Adjudication at university) Song title: Annie Ross' *Doodlin*

>Film 2 (Vocal Adjudication at university) Song title: Horace Silver's *Peace*

>Photo shot (Voice Symposium competition) First Place tie!!

>Film 3 (Voice Symposium competition) Song title: Cole Porter's *Every time We Say Goodbye*

>Photo Shot of Paul and Jeri

The design of his course of study created an enhanced sense of self-esteem and empowerment for him, thus increasing his motivation and targeting directions he would use for staged performance. Paramount in enhancing his education was in making a point of getting to know Paul as a person, voice student,

and producer. As this relationship grew exponentially through the years, his effect on my humanity has provided me a lifetime of inner, emotional nourishment which I use daily.

> View of Paul's composition and arrangement for gospel, jazz choir

Paul was positively transported through the assignment as he included instrumentation and parts for chorus! They were exceptional and professional.

In one performance I recall Paul with the hydraulic lifting of his wheel chair as part of the finale during his recitation. In addition to his soulful rendering, his movement on stage was inspiring to all of the singers, technical staff and audience in general. How special!!

Conclusion

The focus of this paper has been centered on a singer who is a performer with muscular dystrophy and has been aimed at presenting (a) the subject's early life as background, (b) and an overview of experiential learning in vocal instruction in the setting of private vocal instruction leading to a completion of education and performance readiness.

It is the hope that this paper will begin dialogue that challenges the argument that vocal instruction for disabled singers with conditions as severe as muscular dystrophy is inconsequential for the aspiring performer, serving more as therapy for voice strengthening and with limited performance outcomes. As much as vocal technique can have a positive effect on physical outcomes of the severely disabled singers who wish to perform, it is also clear that one can improve mood, energy, social participation, and quality of life for an at-risk population. Specific, customized singing courses of study can augment these general improvements by improving vocal intensity, self-esteem and empowerment.