



The Embodied Voice

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The Embodied Voice is the umbrella title of a progressive series of intensive courses for students of singing, incorporating a longitudinal study in collaboration with Santa Fe Lírica, complementary to the diploma course at the Instituto Superior de Música of the Universidad Nacional del Litoral in Argentina, co-curated with Profesora Susana Caligaris. Each student, whether beginner or advanced, is given technical and musical guidance in a singing master class format under the title *Singing with Style*. A subsequent course, with the title *The Voice, the Body and the Stage*, adds integrated movement. A group class establishes simple but effective principles of stagecraft. Then each participant brings a song or aria they have prepared musically (classical, jazz or pop) to work on expressive movement and gesture. At each stage the resulting performances are given in the context of public concerts. Two studies were developed in parallel with these courses, *Towards the Concept of the Embodied* and *Voice in Action*, whose objective was to design a simple method of quantifying qualitative observations while avoiding the possibility of subjective bias in teachers and students. The final stage in the present course was to mount a production of Mozart's *Bastían y Bastiana*, to give the students the experience of a complete role, or at least participation in a complete work.

The pedagogical paradigm within which this takes place can be seen summarized in Figure 1. Although this is a linear representation of pedagogical approach and development of the singer, each element will require revisiting and rebalancing in varying degrees, especially in new repertoire. And so, each lesson should be a microcosm of actions that represent to a great extent the overall medium- or long-term plan.

Once the balance of natural, or primal, sound with the breath, connection with the core (or support) and postural alignment are established, the physical feedback circuit of phonation, resonance and articulation can be developed in parallel with the psychological feedback circuit (involving the student's understanding of self as well as the teacher's insights). This is a constant process of assimilation, including the management of unnecessary systemic diversionary movements (Gilman, 2014) (which generally arise from physical and psychological inhibitions), progressively leading to the establishment of the optimal voice. The imagination (as much to understand the application of technique as well as to give life to the music) and the bodily experience allow access to a range of resources that establish an ever-improving capacity to express, interpret and communicate. In the evolution of these processes the true vocal identity begins to appear (with implications of personal identity) as well as the ability to act and the artistic command of interpretation.

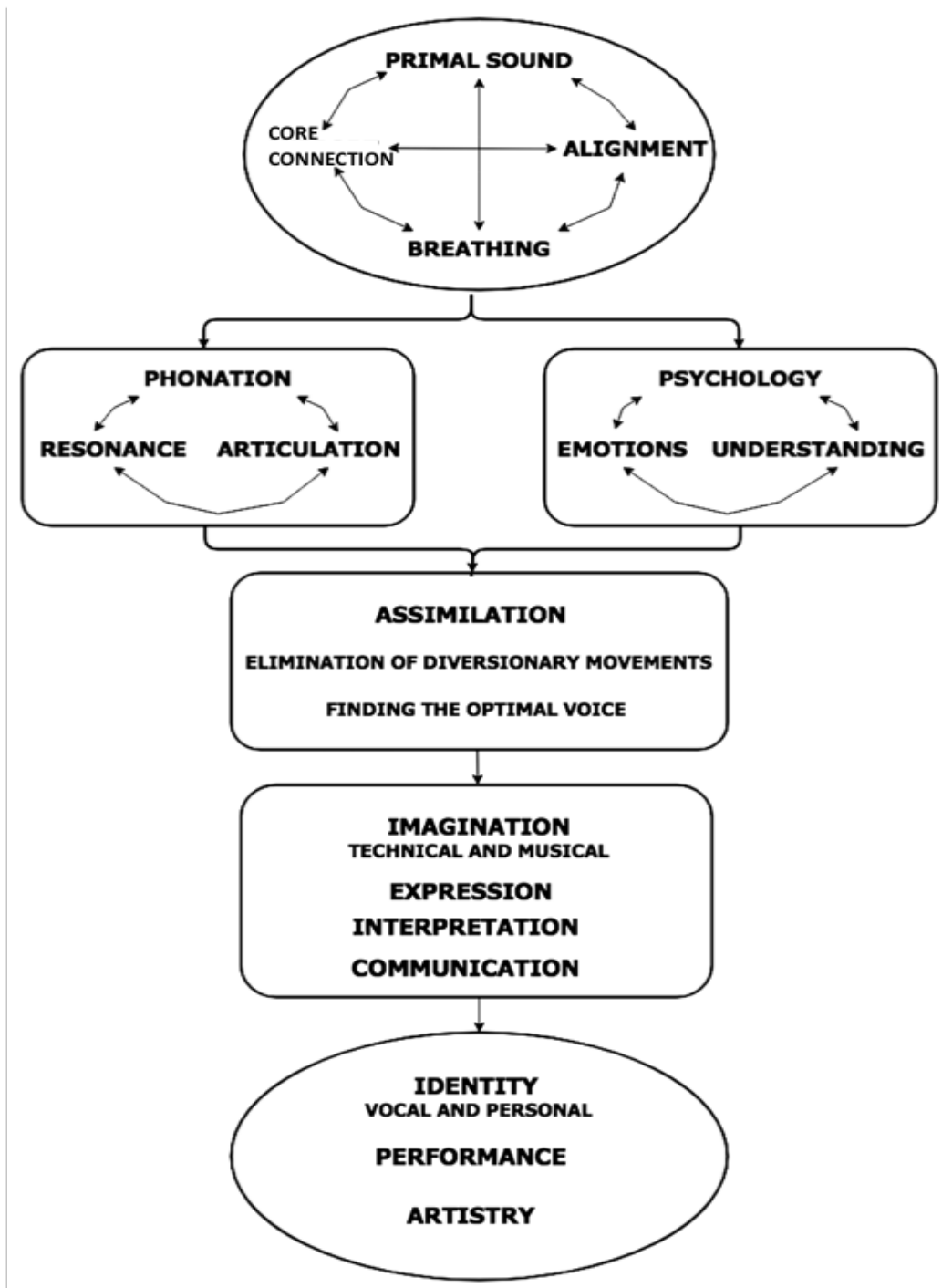
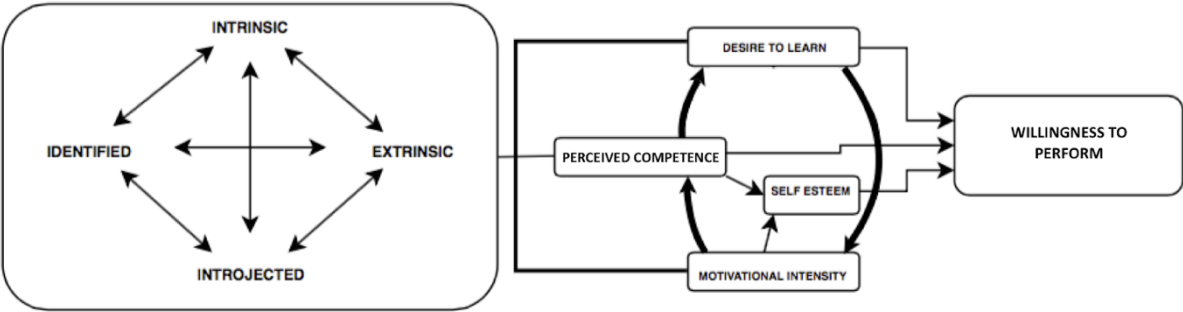


Figure 1. A model for pedagogy and progress. © Salmon and Caligaris 2018.

As illustrated in Figure 2, we begin with the idea that each individual starts with their own intrinsic set of skills, resources and capability. Then throughout life they acquire an accumulation of conditioning influences which cause them to take on certain extraneous



characteristics, with which they feel they identify, adopting introjected behaviours which give place to an extrinsic heritage formed by gained knowledge and resources, adopted prejudices, imposed exterior limits etc.

Figure 2. SELF-DETERMINATION AND OUTCOMES: A MODEL, SALMON 2018, after McIntyre, Schnare and Ross, 2018 (adapted from McIntyre, Schnare and Ross, *Self-determination theory and motivation for music*; Psychology in Music; sempre:).

Work on the voice should be based initially in the identification and development of the intrinsic aspects, understanding one’s internal world, and embracing it with recognition and acceptance. This first step will lead to the understanding of the students’ own capabilities, producing a greater motivation and desire to learn, reinforcing self-esteem and materializing as a stronger wish to perform.

The whole process occurs within the recognized learning cycle of identifying and overcoming an unconscious incompetence, and assimilating the corrective competence to a level of more natural execution (see Figure 3).

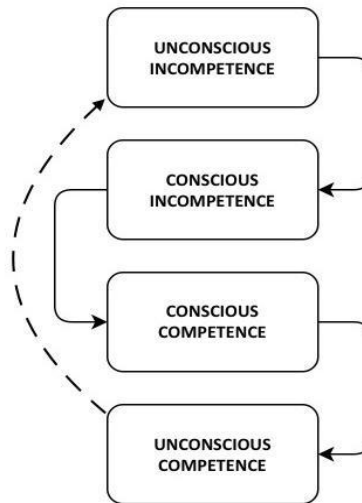


Figure 3. THE LEARNING CYCLE

The Voice, the Body and the Stage was a four-day stagecraft course for students with little or no experience of the stage. Some had performed little more than a song in class or an exam. 23 singing students, 15 female and 8 male, took part in turn as active students, and when not active, as observers. Most were present or past students of the Instituto Superior Musical of the Universidad del Litoral, Santa Fe, Argentina. The age range was 18 to 36, and ability ranged from first year students to semi-professional. Each prepared a piece of classical, jazz or popular song about 3 - 4 minutes in length. Of the 23 students, 8 participated in both classical and jazz/pop categories, 12 in classical alone and 3 in jazz/pop alone. Each day began with a half-hour group movement class incorporating basic stagecraft. Then, observed by the group, a forty-minute period was used for collaboration between teacher and each student to create individual scenes with simple integrated actions relevant to the repertoire. At the end of the course each student in turn presented their scene on stage in two concerts, one classical, the other jazz/pop, to a public audience.

To be as inclusive as possible within the strict time constraints available (one forty-minute session per student and a quick run-through on the day of performance) the following list of basic stagecraft resources was defined, as preparatory exercises that could be put into practice, while developing the scenes and in performance:

Familiarity with walking on stage: An inexperienced student may suddenly become incredibly self-conscious about walking on the stage. So after a few loosening-up exercises the whole group was simply directed to walk round in a circle, to feel really grounded, the feet actually taking

possession of the ground. Then, while continuing to walk, directing the body to take possession of the space (feeling tall, looking out, not to the ground etc.); as somebody said to me today “Sternum zu die Sterne”, and so gradually opening themselves up. Learning to let go, mentally to fill the space.

How to cross the stage: not only this, but how to initiate a movement, once they have got used to producing a certain amount of presence. The initial instinct nearly always seems to be to cross the leg across the body. For example, to walk from right to left, the tendency is for the student to cross the right leg leftwards across the body. The effect is to twist the body, and to close it off to an extent from the audience. Visually, it appears weak. The quick key was to be aware of the weight on their feet. To walk left, the preparatory thought should be to have the weight on the right foot. The left foot is then free to move, without twisting or closing the body. And vice versa. Although this can seem obvious, it was a real thought process for the inexperienced student. To practice this the students were directed to walk repeatedly from one side of the stage to the other, and back again, always being aware of the feet. An interesting discovery appeared while the individual scenes were being created. Whenever an inelegance arose, the cause very often stemmed not from the gesture itself but from the feet, the stance. This tool also provided a mental resource, both ‘geographically’ in the stage space, and in controlling nerves and focus on memory; a means of rooting oneself physically and mentally.

Various exercises extended this principle. The group was split into two, one half each side of the stage. They were directed to cross the stage past each other, exchanging an acknowledgement as they passed. The direction of movement then became freeform, the students being directed to acknowledge each other, while remaining aware of grounding their feet (as Noel Coward said, “Learn your lines and don’t bump into the furniture”). Then they were directed to sing their national anthem at the same time. This was a simple way of building cognitive load, or distraction, which could then be applied while setting each particular song. Some specifics of stage awareness were then introduced.

The strength of the diagonal: the general tendency is to want to move in a straight line forwards and backwards or side to side. So it was important to demonstrate the strength of the diagonal on stage, whether in a move, or a stance, or in a look (rather as in figurative art, allied with the strength of the triangle).

The students then explored the difference between *Moving in a curve*, and *Moving in a straight line*, with each movement’s inherent qualities. For example, *Moving in a curve* can ‘possess’ the stage space with more authority, or simply can be valuable in extending a move to suit the musical phrasing, whereas *Moving in a straight line* can be more direct or challenging, or in contrast desperate or pleading. These apparently simple directions become valuable tools in the shaping of a scene, and building the confidence of the inexperienced performer. Further elements were added in the context of those already established.

Awareness of placing in relation to the stage space: Here the students were encouraged to develop an awareness of their position in the stage space, and in relation to other colleagues, furniture etc.. A simple illustration of an error: if one gets too close to the scenery the tendency will be to disappear, unless doing something that uses, or relates to, the scenery. This element also develops awareness ‘behind the head’, or stage ‘antennae’.

Relating to the auditorium while relating to the stage: The performer can get so bound up with the action on stage that they forget about the audience. It is important to keep the ‘antennae’ going the whole time. It could be called acting with one’s back. But crucially, this is not about teaching the students to ‘act’. It’s about giving them the hooks with which to release their natural expression.

How to ‘cheat’ while singing: This specific stage technique is essential for the opera singer. If the person being sung to is behind (ie. upstage of) the singer, the singer’s instinct is to keep turning round to the upstage colleague, but away from the audience in front of them. This stems from very good intention, but is very bad stage technique. It can be quite hard to convince the singer to sing forwards to include the audience (this can be in any three-dimensional diagonal, not necessarily, indeed often avoiding, singing directly forwards), occasionally referring back, or with a sideways glance. If the upstage personage is listening actively in engaged fashion, then the audience will believe that the downstage singer is singing to the colleague who is upstage. Of course, one sees this sort of thing in cinema and television all the time. A more sophisticated form of this takes place in intimate love duets, but this was not the opportunity to explore that aspect.

The timing of a move or gesture: This is slightly more specialized but equally important concept, and rather interesting in its effectiveness. The music should justify the gesture, rather than defining the music with the gesture. This can be illustrated more effectively by demonstration than by description, but the principle is to time a movement or gesture just before a musical moment or climax rather than in synchronicity with it. The difference is subtle but can be powerful. Once absorbed, this technique can be empowering to the performer.

Other concepts explored were those of *Specificity of gesture* and *Clarity of thought*. These could be explored more concisely during the development of each individual scene. The objective here was to enhance dramatic communication, avoiding generalized gesturing (often called ‘windmill’ or ‘tea-tray’ acting). The effect of this is to unify the musical, dramatic and gestural processes in a form that gives confidence and focus to the performer.

Of course, the students were not expected to memorise every element in the time available, but a valuable framework was created to which one could refer while building each scene. Most scenes constituted just one performer on stage with practically nothing around them, the aim

being to facilitate expressive freedom rather than encumbering stage ‘business’. There was the luxury of working in the theatre space, so while the students were concentrating on their individual scene, they were also getting accustomed to the stage area, and gaining familiarity with the auditorium. There was no need for transition between the rehearsal room and the theatre space.

This work took place in an 800 seat theatre – quite a daunting prospect for a singer with no experience. When it was time to perform, the use of this progressive framework gave the students confidence to inhabit themselves, in a character, just for three minutes, in that big space, in front of an audience. Of course, still photographs cannot show movement, but may give an idea of the transformation in students who by nature were limited in gesture.

One scene from the classical evening was particularly interesting. The student, a soprano, was singing “Sebben crudele”. With careful management of diversionary movements, this simple *aria anticha* turned into a touching break-up of boyfriend and girlfriend.

The pop/jazz repertoire was treated with very similar principles, but in a very different venue – a modern concert hall with a wide, shallow stage and an audience capacity of about 200. All sang without amplification, quite simply because they are able to! This seemed to enhance the connection to the body, and help the students sing in a way more true to themselves, not just imitating a style. Some of these performances were utterly heart-wrenching because each student had chosen their song. The economy of gesture, and giving purpose in all the ways here described, fed what they wanted to do in performance, which therefore communicated powerfully to those present.

The culminating point of this progression, a year later, was to give the students a taste of performing a whole opera, not just a song. A large-scale opera was not practicable, so the small-scale opera, *Bastian y Bastiana* by the juvenile Mozart, was chosen. It is three-hander for soprano, tenor, bass and a chorus, and was mounted in the same theatre. There were two casts who mixed and matched over three nights of performances. The opera played to full houses, because it was very unusual to do this kind of thing. For those with almost no experience, in the afternoons there were complete performances mounted as a ‘collage’. For example, where the soprano had four arias, four sopranos were tasked with learning one aria each. When one aria finished, the next soprano moved from the wings to stand behind the previous singer, who then exited, leaving the same character sung by a different soprano. The transition was aided by a boy dressed as a twelve-year-old Mozart (Mozart wrote the opera when he was twelve), delivering a short narration instead of the dialogue, which also acted as a brief misdirection. As the afternoon performances were for schools, this device also facilitated audience identification with what was for them a completely unfamiliar medium. The children in the audience, who were generally very young, had hardly been to the theatre, and had never seen an opera in their lives. And the

effect on all audiences, children and adult alike, was striking.

More experienced students were given the opportunity to be incorporated into the production by means of minor additions to the story line for theatrical effect. An example: The bass character was a magician, who was given some simple magic tricks to employ. At one point the magic went wrong, and a tenor entered on a motorbike to sing a hopelessly inappropriate aria with nine high Cs ‘(Pour mon ame’ from Donizetti’s *La Fille du Regiment*), remounted his motorcycle and exited, while the true plot was resumed.

The overall result was that the audience engaged and was entertained, and the student participants had a great sense of learning, empowerment and achievement. Thus one could see that from simple resources of stagecraft complex interactions and expressivity can arise. Finally, a personal note – it was the Congress’ slogan, ‘For the Sake of Music’ that inspired me to apply to participate, for this reason: as performers, or as facilitators through our students, we want to create art, and we want that art to communicate. So my thanks go to ICVT for this opportunity.

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