

From the Dojo to the Voice Studio: Many Paths...

By Thomas Erik Angerhoffer

Morihei Ueshiba, martial arts master and founder of Aikido, is attributed with the famous quote, “there are many paths leading to the top of Mt. Fuji, but there is only one summit — love.” This is but one of the many platitudes beloved and repeated by martial artists around the world that have gained widespread popularity. An older version of this quote ends with, “but there is only one sunset to be seen by those who reach its summit.” This is meant to suggest that there are many different and valid ways to find your way to the truth, to solve a problem, or to achieve the same result. What I find interesting is that these quotes neglect to mention that for every path that leads up the mountain, there are likely dozens of paths that lead off a cliff! That quote, however, wouldn’t be likely to sell many bumper stickers.

“As a teacher, I aim to encourage my students to create their own paths, while helping to steer them clear of the ones that lead to danger. And, whenever that isn’t possible, I at least try to arm them with the tools they will need to navigate themselves to safety.”

In 2024, I celebrated 40 years of martial arts practice. Interestingly, that year also marked 40 years of studying singing. Like my journey in martial arts, my life in music has had its twists and turns, ups and downs, bumps and bruises, and has been anything but a path straight up the mountain. In fact, I think I probably discovered most of those cliffs along the way. Of course, there are many things that one needs to experience and learn for oneself, but there are also many times when it is perfectly reasonable learning from the example of others. As a teacher, I aim to encourage my students to create their own paths, while helping to steer them clear of the ones that lead to danger. And, whenever that isn’t possible, I at least try to arm them with the tools they will need to navigate themselves to safety.

In the martial arts, we refer to this as “functional spontaneity.” Years of repetitive exercises, each with distinct learning outcomes, progressively adding variables and



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difficulty to the point where neural pathways are shortened and strengthened in a way that the response to a variety of stimuli becomes habituated, with the aim of responding dispassionately to unwarranted aggression... “this is the way,” as the Mandalorian said. Seems familiar, right? Well, hopefully not the aggression part, but the part about the training seems a lot like the way we craft and practice vocalises. In the case of the singer, significant time and energy is put into vocalizing so that our intentions manifest into appropriate physical action habitually so that we are

easily able to navigate the challenges found in the score. And, when that doesn’t happen, we turn the difficult passages of the score into an exercise to build the requisite skill to handle them with ease. This is exactly how the ancient masters of the martial arts developed the forms, or solo exercises that have been passed down from generation to generation.

This is but one of the strange and wonderful parallels between the practices of music and the martial arts. I’ve been fortunate to learn from many incredible teachers, in both music and martial arts, and I’ve also learned from a number of less incredible teachers, too. Most of them helped point me toward the summit, and a few led me toward some cliffs, but I’ve always had some great people around me that picked



Thomas Erik Angerhoffer participates in a martial arts seminar.

me up, brushed me off, and walked the path with me until I was able to walk on my own (even when straying from the path was entirely my doing). For that, I am forever grateful, for it is only when you get far enough down the path that you realize the journey is truly the destination, and that one doesn't have to reach the summit to find and share the love, joy, and sometimes frustration, of the adventure. Hence, I'd like to share with you some of the lessons I continue to learn from this twofold exploration of music and martial arts in the form of maxims that have shown to be relevant and meaningful to me as a singer and self-professed "karate bum."

"When the student is ready, the teacher appears." There have been many times throughout my decades in the martial arts when I have been introduced to *what seems to be* new information. Sometimes these new techniques, concepts, or ideas are absolutely transformative. My martial arts teacher calls these BFO's, or "blinding flashes of the obvious." My first thought is, "Wow — this is incredible," but it usually isn't long before my thoughts turn to shame or even anger. "How did I not know this before... it is so foundational to everything I do?" Even worse, "Why didn't anyone show me this before — it is so *basic*!?" This has happened in singing, as well. One example is breathing; I can remember the year I first began to understand breathing. It was 2008. That's like, 24 years into taking lessons. I even had another epiphany in 2016 when I was presented with new information that seemed like I should've known all along. Now, I'm certain that many of my teachers helped me with breathing from the very beginning, but there really was *so much* to learn. Also, don't forget, it's all happening at once. The reality is that on those days in 2008 and 2016 I was ready to learn those lessons. They've changed my life, and I'm so thankful that I met those people who shared that info when I was able to hear it.

"Before enlightenment, chop wood and carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood and carry water." Early in my martial arts training, I was fascinated with ninjas. I mean, they are just so freakin' sweet. Back flips, front flips, throwing stars, cool shoes... what's not to love? In my quest for ninjahood, I trained in a number of martial arts, never quite attaining the skills that I admired from the movies. In fact, not one of the styles I practiced had *any* acrobatics. Long after the dissolution of my childhood fantasy, I found myself teaching martial arts full time to a large student body ranging from age 4 to 84. By that time, I had already enjoyed a successful competitive career and had become much more interested in the process as I was tasked with helping others acquire and develop skill. As a singer, I went from performer, to student, to wanna-be performer, to dropout, to student



Photo credit Opera Fort Collins

Thomas Erik Angerhoffer appears in a production of *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

again, to free-lancer, to part-time teacher, to full-time teacher; not exactly the straight and narrow, but very much like my martial arts journey. As I transitioned toward becoming a full-time teacher, I realized that I had already been more interested in process, which probably didn't make me the best performer. I've leaned into numerous technologies and advancements over the years, but as much as things change, some things remain the same. Remember the things you did to get good? The *basics*? They're not all that appealing, and they're certainly not trendy, but guess what — whatever you did to get good is exactly what you need to keep doing to stay good.

"Slow leads to smooth. Smooth leads to fast." Have you ever seen Tai Chi before? It is typically associated with the aging population as a form of physical activity. We see countless pictures of people practicing Tai Chi in the park, all

moving in slow motion to better their health and longevity. While it is true that there are amazing physical and cognitive benefits to this practice, especially for those who are looking for something low impact, the original purpose of the art is actually self-protection. Wait a minute... how can one protect oneself in slow motion? The interesting thing is that this slow, deliberate practice was actually designed to promote structure and efficiency *while moving fast*. By slowing things down, one is able to focus on skeletal alignment and muscular efficiency, developing kinesthetic awareness and shortening/strengthening neural pathways, cutting the reaction time from stimulus to response, all the while empowering the body to release the power of intention with ease and predictability. In modern terminology, we refer to this as *deep* or *deliberate* practice. Having difficulty with that passage that starts in your lower range and goes through the transition to your higher range? Slow it down. Transpose it down. Slide on a single vowel, maintaining integrity and structure from the low note to the high note. Add more vowels. Add in the rest of the notes but stay “slidey.” Add in the rest of the vowels while maintaining a consistent and appropriate vocal tract shape. Slowly pick up the tempo. Start transposing it back up. Go past the speed and pitch where

you had difficulty. Good. You’ve got this. *This is the way*. Or maybe just a way, but a way that will, hopefully, keep you from going over the cliff — or at least give you some tools to claw your way back up. The nice thing is that there will be a lot of wonderful people there to help you up and walk the path with you when you’re ready.

Thomas Erik Angerhofer was encouraged to pursue his passions for music and martial arts going back to his elementary school years. He has benefitted from excellent instruction in both, leading to many successes and countless failures. Nevertheless, he continues to follow his bliss and does his best to help others along the way. He currently runs his own private dojo, catering to all types of learners, especially those seeking to “liberate themselves from the classical mess” — Bruce Lee. Likewise, he has a private vocal studio of professional singers from across the spectrum of genres. He has taught voice and directed shows at a handful of institutions across the states, and has performed in opera, musical theatre, concert, recital, and the American Songbook from Buffalo to Beirut. He received a doctorate and master’s degree in music from the University of Colorado, Boulder, and a bachelor’s degree from SUNY Fredonia. In addition to his independent studio, he currently serves as the voice area coordinator at West Virginia University.

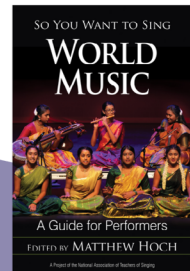
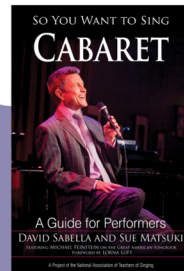
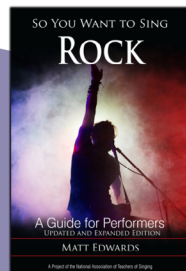
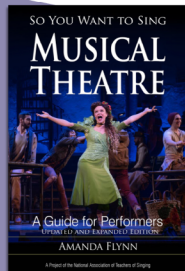
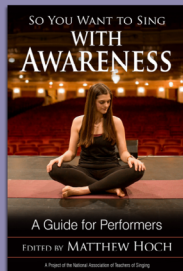
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