

CHAPTER TWO

THE ROLE OF SINGING IN MUSIC EDUCATION

“Good singing means skilful playing on a well tuned instrument – the human voice.”¹
Julian Gardiner

In music education classes in junior and intermediate schools singing is one of the most common activities. As Arnold Bentley states: “Singing is still the most important medium for music education.”² Yet why should children learn to sing, and why does singing play such a prominent role in music classes? This chapter will address these questions with discussions of the social and physical benefits of singing, and the role this activity plays in the lives of adults as well as children.

Singing as part of culture

Joseph Mainzer writing in 1841 said: “Singing, undoubtedly, constitutes the first ground-work of musical education. All the other branches are only imitations of singing.”³ Singing is one of the most natural means of human communication and expression. Horace Mann wrote: “The voice and the ear are universal endowments... the pleasure resulting from the human voice in song, is the common patrimony of mankind.”⁴ Amongst the Maori people for instance singing is an integral part of their culture. Stuart Manins writes: “Music, as a vital part of a tradition based on communal living, is important because it is widely used in everyday life as well as on special and important occasions. Many Maori children sing spontaneously and fluently because they live with adults who sing frequently, who use singing to enhance all aspects of life, and who enjoy their musical involvement.”⁵

Songs are indeed an important part of the social fabric of all cultures. “Every ritual we share calls for its own music: birth, marriage, death, the planting and the harvest, the coming of spring and fertility, the changing of the seasons, the sufferings of illness and the recovery of health.”⁶ Songs also often arouse and express emotions. “The combination of music and speech into the single expression of song has unique power, conveying feelings of great elation or almost unbearable poignancy.”⁷ Songs are used for protest, for love and honour; they are used as expressions of unity through national anthems. Graeme Askew cites a 1974 study which “found that debilitated youngsters and adults with extreme mental handicaps only passed nights quietly when under the influence of cradle songs.”⁸ Singing is thus an ideal tool to express the common themes of humanity. However there are also other physical benefits to singing.

Physical benefits of singing

When one sings there is a continuation of vibration and energy, whereas in speaking this momentum is constantly arrested. Since the vocal chords vibrate to produce sound, does it follow that the development of tone and resonance arising from the correct use of the singing voice has a positive effect on the speaking voice? Joseph Mainzer wrote: “Singing is the most effective means to improve the organs of the voice, if naturally good.”⁹ Carl Seashore supports this view: “Musicians should recognise that their most effective ally in the cultivation of a

beautiful singing voice lies in the early promotion of the development of an understanding of the meaning and the possibilities of a good speaking voice.”¹⁰ Richard Miller also writes that the singing voice is not independent of the speech mechanism. “Problems of the singing voice frequently are directly attributable to poor speech production.”¹¹ He goes on to say that any vocal fatigue a singer may suffer is more likely to be caused by improper speech habits than an inadequate singing technique. However Morton Cooper, a speech therapist, disagrees with this notion. He maintains that many opera singers are schooled in the technique of correct singing, but they “have little if any awareness of what is efficient or inefficient, let alone what is aesthetic, in regard to the speaking voice. . . Misuse and abuse of the speaking voice may negatively influence and affect, if not destroy, the singing voice.”¹² Anyone who screams or shouts and then tries to sing, will find that these activities have an adverse effect on one’s vocal chords and they do not respond well. Equally if one uses the speaking voice a great deal, such as a teacher might do in a school classroom, this also tends to tire out the vocal chords, and singing becomes a strain.

However there are many opera singers who do have resonant speaking voices, such as Jessye Norman, Placido Domingo and Luciano Pavarotti to name a few. It is also true that if a person speaks in well-modulated tones using the natural placement of the voice, a vocal specialist can usually tell what kind of a singing voice that person might have. For example a man who speaks with a very deep sonorous voice would either have the singing voice of a bass or a bass baritone. Good singing does have a positive effect on speech. The speaking voice has to be utilised in order to help students to understand about their vocal mechanism in singing. By speaking at different pitches and employing the breath correctly this develops the range and resonance capacity of both the singing and speaking voice.

If good singing has a positive effect on speaking, surely good speech should equally have a positive effect on good singing? Kurt Baum, an operatic tenor, supported this view. He said that good speaking leads to good singing.¹³ Some people believe there does exist a correlation between the speaking voice and the singing voice. Morton Cooper believes that individual personalities may be affected by the misuse of the speaking voice. “Any problem with the speaking voice can cause a personality change or a vocal neurosis.”¹⁴ Thus children should be taught to develop the vocal mechanism through speech and song for their own well being. One’s speaking voice is after all something unique to every one of us, and it is a crucial part of our identity. “We can be ruled, nations sometimes have been ruled, by a voice rather than by the words it spoke.”¹⁵ Think of Hitler and his charismatic ability to sway the nation.

The sound experience

David Evans believes that children should be exposed to singing no matter how young: “It is at least as important in their musical development as talking to them is in their speech development.”¹⁶ The human embryo’s first sensory perception is the sound of its Mother’s heartbeat while still in the womb. At birth a baby’s first response is to make vocal sounds that begin with a bawl. Moorhead and Pond write: “Music is for young children, primarily the discovery of sound.”¹⁷ We live in a world dominated by sound, it is part of our consciousness and it can evoke different responses depending on our association with different types of sound. Judith Akoschky describes children’s fascination with sound: “If we watch children at play, imagining and dramatising situations, creating characters or inventing stories, we will notice that

they often accompany themselves with sounds. These sounds become 'characters' within the tale, adding action and making it more dynamic." ¹⁸

Graeme Askew writes: "Sound and music directly affect the human body. This has been known since at least the time of the Egyptian pharaohs... the ancient Greeks also realised that music had an effect on health and used it as a recuperative device." ¹⁹ Murray Schafer is a music educator who has devoted his life to the exploration of sound through music education. He believes that "music is something which sounds. If it doesn't sound it isn't music." ²⁰ In his teaching he has tried to make the enthusiastic discovery of music precede the ability to play an instrument or read notes. An obvious choice for discovering sound possibilities is to make use of the human voice through speech and song. Janet Mills believes that anyone can learn to sing at any age: "One cannot learn to sing overnight, but, with sustained practice, it is possible." ²¹ Practice is the operative word. However, there are two important considerations in discovering one's singing voice viz. the ability to hear the pitch, and the ability to translate that into vocal sound through the vocal mechanism.

"The teaching of singing is to a great extent the teaching of ear training." ²² Developing a musical ear is a crucial component of singing. Without the capacity to hear pitch, we might just as well speak sounds in monotonous. Martina Arroyo, an opera singer, describes pitch as "mental as well as physical. Mentally you must be as high as you are physically. The voice starts in the mind, not in the body." ²³ Pitch association comes about through learning to listen to sounds in a concentrated manner. Concepts of high and low can be taught through movement and spatial awareness; through the use of a keyboard which teaches children to associate sound with the visual element of up and down; and through comparing the sounds of everyday machines such as a vacuum cleaner and the ring of a telephone.

As mentioned before, exercising the speaking voice at different pitches teaches awareness of the possibilities of the vocal range. Joseph Mainzer wrote: "by listening to singing we learn to distinguish the gradation in which the voice is raised or lowered; the ear becomes practised and able to receive and convey the nicest distinctions of tone to the seat of perception. Thus, by gradually attempting to imitate others, we succeed in rendering the organs of voice capable of reproducing the tones which the ear has received." ²⁴

The effects of training and enculturation

Children's awareness of their singing voices is learned through hearing and imitating, i.e. being immersed in a musical environment through the process of enculturation. David Evans writes: "We have such narrow ideas about what constitutes 'music' and these often blind us to what is happening with very small children. It also limits our expectations. For instance, from the time when a baby begins to babble he is already beginning to sing in tune, and by the time he can speak he should be able to sing." ²⁵ Evans goes on to describe how babies he has known who have been sung to frequently are capable of accurately participating in "snatches of the tunes of familiar songs or nursery rhymes at the age when they are starting to talk... it is the *familiarity* of the kind of sound we call singing, the *meaningfulness* and *closeness* of the experience, that makes all the difference." ²⁶ Children who are deprived of these enculturation experiences may present themselves at school as 'tone deaf' with an inability to pitch any notes correctly, or else they show an unwillingness to participate in any activities that involve singing.

Training can play a vital role in a child's musical development as well as offering a personally enriching experience. Kodaly believed that the human voice was the most immediately available instrument and therefore the best way to approach and appreciate music. The objectives in his pedagogy are twofold: "to aid in the well-balanced social and artistic development of the child, and to produce the musically literate adult-literate in the fullest sense of being able to look at a musical score and "think" sound, to read and write music as easily as words."²⁷

The basis of the Kodaly music training programme is sol-fa, which involves the hand signs that he adopted from John Curwen in the nineteenth century. Kodaly believed in first teaching the movable *do* until students begin to learn pitch notation i.e. traditional clefs and letter names. Young children have a limited singing range, and the advantage of the movable *do* is that it allows the teacher to change the pitch of a song or melody to accommodate the young voices. Sol-fa is a very effective means of teaching pitch in particular, as it combines the visual with the aural. Erzsébet Szönyi believes that acquisition of a good ear is only a matter of intelligent training. In Hungary children are engaged in routine daily singing. The results have shown that children who entered a music primary school with minimal singing ability or an unmusical ear acquire a keen sense of pitch, as well as a good singing ability in a period of only one to two months. "If the melodic interval relations of relative sol-fa are once learnt methodically from memory, and at a significantly early age, aural insecurity is automatically eliminated."²⁸

Carl E. Seashore wrote: "sense of pitch depends upon the structure of the ear...no amount of training or maturing can improve the pitch acuity of the ear. However, training and maturing... can greatly increase the functional scope of these capacities."²⁹ Roger Buckton and Stuart Manins make the point that the ability to perceive rhythms and pitch is usually fully developed by the age of seven. "Indeed hearing acuity begins to decline as part of the aging process from about age six."³⁰ The training process is thus a crucial element in the child's musical development.

In New Zealand, many primary and intermediate schools do not employ specialist music teachers, and the Kodaly method does require teachers who are trained in this pedagogy. In a music education study made in 1997 of nine Auckland schools, seven out of eleven generalist teachers were familiar with Kodaly methodology and aspects of it were used in their teaching. The other four generalist teachers in the study had never heard of Kodaly.³¹

Kodaly was particularly concerned with the kind of songs that children should be exposed to in their music programmes. He believed that children should be made culturally aware of their cultural heritage through learning folksongs of their language and culture. The lyrics of these songs should correspond to their age group and mentality. Kodaly's focus on child developmental characteristics with a careful structure of sequential learning make it an ideal musical training programme. However it is this researcher's belief that aspects of the Kodaly method probably work best in a European setting since that society is homogenous and there is an established cultural tradition that people can draw from. Kodaly's insistence on authentic folk music is a problem in New Zealand. The Maori and Pacific Islanders have a rich heritage of traditional music that is intricately tied to their culture, but the New Zealand population as a whole contains representatives of many different cultures.

Childrens' singing can be developed in many ways: control, tone, vocal range, vocal dynamics and expressive quality. The singing experience should become an integral part of every child's musical awareness. If singing can be perceived as an enjoyable and fun activity in which children can express their emotions, it stimulates their imagination, and offers positive reinforcement as it allows them the opportunity to excel. The wider implications of the enabling of self-growth and self-knowledge are seen in the development not only of aesthetic awareness, but also of the self-confidence which comes through opportunities for musically talented students to perform in public "to inspire, encourage, and entertain their peers." ³²

An example of the positive effects of such training was relayed to this researcher by a music educator in Auckland who described her experience with a young child named David. David was aged seven when he met his music teacher. He was a child of average intelligence who came from a family with no interest in music. He had therefore never been exposed to hearing anyone singing, or even attempted to sing himself. At the start of each school day the class register was taken in the form of a singing game in which the teacher would sing each child's name as a minor third interval: "Samuel are you here?" The child would imitate this interval with his sung response: "Yes I'm here." David however, refused to even try to sing. He told his teacher that he "could not hear the sounds."

During music education classes the children were given many opportunities to sing as a group. At first, David showed little enthusiasm or interest in any class singing and he often behaved aggressively during these sessions. The teacher did not try to force him to participate, but she noticed David responded well to the actions of these songs. She wanted to encourage him as much as possible, so she decided to begin each music class by focussing on movement and actions to songs that she herself would sing. Next she divided the class into two groups, with one group singing and the other group doing the actions. Finally the whole class would sing and move together. This became a regular "game" which everyone seemed to enjoy. She was aware that David's attitude began to change over a period of a few weeks. He started to join in the class singing and one day he actually sang his response to the morning register. The whole class applauded while David was actually unaware of what he had done! He then went on to become one of the most enthusiastic singers in the class.

This case is an example of the effects of both training and enculturation. It seems that three key elements were present that offered David the nurturing environment in which to experience musical growth as well as increased self-esteem.

- In terms of enculturation, an important element was David's constant exposure to the sounds of his peers singing and perhaps even more importantly, their enjoyment while engaging in this activity.
- Secondly with regard to training, he had the opportunity to use his vocal mechanism for the first time in his young life. As part of the training process he was also developing a musical ear through pitch perception, and he was learning new songs which were helping him with his vocabulary.
- Thirdly tribute must be paid to the teacher for her patient understanding of David's obvious frustration with an activity that he had never been exposed to before. She helped to bring about a potentially life-changing situation for this child – he discovered the joy of singing and importantly, a growth in self-confidence.

A documented example of how training and culture can play an important role in the formative years is found in Roger Buckton's vocal survey of over 1,000 children aged six that he conducted in Auckland in 1983. His results revealed that "Maori and Pacific Island children sang significantly more accurately than European children... It may be concluded that enculturation processes of Polynesians support in-tune singing to such an extent that practically all can sing in tune by the age of six."³³ In the case of the European children, only those classes that had training in singing in tune with a teacher, were of a comparable level of accuracy with the Polynesians.

The onus of responsibility thus falls on the teachers to train children in the art of singing. As singing is such a natural physical process of expression which is achievable in every child who has the capacity to hear, it is vital that this training occurs as soon as the child is of school going age. Paul Michel analysed the development of 441 highly musically gifted children. He concluded that: "The optimal achievement, i.e. the particularly fast and comprehensive development of basic musical abilities, the 'sensitive' or 'optimal' phase, lies in the 5th-6th year of life, so that here the possibility for the rapid training of vocal or hearing abilities should be used."³⁴

If we wish to ensure a future generation of people in New Zealand who create, recreate and appreciate music in the form of song, we do need to establish an effective training programme in the schools. Too many students did not fare well in the NEMP singing tests. Singing is a natural and ancient tradition that needs to be upheld. Arnold Bentley offers a final comment on this point: "The voice is the most intimately controlled, and well used, the most beautiful of musical instruments... If all our other instruments were taken away there could still be music."³⁵

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