Singing Lessons: A Hidden Pedagogy

KATHARINE SMITHRIM
Queen's University

Two years ago, I created a performance piece called *Singing Lessons: A Performance about Learning to Sing*, in which I tried to demonstrate what I had learned about singing and about life from six remarkable singing teachers. In it, I told the story of my quest for voice, using archival audiotapes and photographs, and by telling stories, by demonstrating some technical aspects of singing, and by singing repertoire I had studied with each teacher. Mary Clare Powell (2002), in a chapter titled "Why I send the poet to teach my courses" explores how being a poet influences her university teaching. It made me think of how being a singer shapes my teaching. This paper is the result. I begin with a segment of the *Singing Lessons* performance piece which includes the script, photographs, and video clips of the sung material.[1] This ten minute long segment takes place approximately in the middle of the original hour-long performance. At the end of the *Singing Lessons* segment, I turn to a reflection on what it means to take my singer to teach my courses.

The Script: Singing Lessons

Aldeburgh is a fishing village on the Suffolk coast of England. The North Sea pounds the shingle shore[2] and the smells of salt sea and freshly caught fish and chips wrapped in newspaper always mingle on that beach. Benjamin Britten, the composer, and Peter Pears, the tenor, lived together in Aldeburgh, and it was there that most of Britten's music was premiered. When I was 27, I went on scholarship to study at the

[1] The accompanist is Mark Sirett.
[2] A shingle shore is a beach composed of small rounded pebbles.

Britten/Pears School of Advance Musical Studies in England, where Peter Pears was giving a series of week-long master classes.

The author with Peter Pears at the Britten/Pears School of Advanced Musical Studies, Snape Maltings, England, July, 1977

A master class is a teaching situation in which each participating musician performs individually while the other participants form the audience. The master teacher critiques each performance and usually works with each musician in turn on some aspect of his or her performance. The first master class Peter Pears presented was on Schubert lieder (lieder is the word for songs in German). Up until that time, I had been singing as a mezzo. We classify women's voices as soprano, mezzo, and contralto. These classifications refer to the quality of the voice as well as the pitch range. A soprano sings in a relatively higher range than a mezzo, and mezzos sing in a relatively higher range than contraltos. The first day, I began to sing Schubert's song *Die Forelle* (The Trout) in the low key:

Video Link

Peter Pears stopped me about there and said "You are no more a mezzo than I am a bass. Sing this in the high key," and he put the high voice

volume of Schubert down on the music stand of the piano. I began again. Again he stopped me, turned to the audience with a smile and a shrug, and they started to whistle and cheer. A soprano was born that moment.

I continued my studies in England through the next year with Laura Sarti at the Guild Hall. It was during that winter in London that I decided not to become a professional singer. Once I was singing beside young singers from many countries, I saw that I had the voice, the smarts and the musicality to sing with the best of them, but what I lacked was the passion. I wasn't driven enough to make it. I wasn't willing to give up everything else in order to sing—something as simple as not going skating on a cold winter's night if I had a rehearsal or performance the next day. So I came back to Canada in a void. Through a series of happy coincidences, I quickly accepted a position teaching music at Jens Haven Memorial School in Nain, Labrador, an isolated Inuit community on the north coast of Labrador. London, England to Nain, Labrador in three weeks! It was a good place to heal my wounds. The pain of not being a singer was huge. When I lost my identity as a singer, I lost my identity completely. For several years, I couldn't go to a concert in Toronto in case I met someone who asked me what I was doing. After a few years, I realised that even though I wasn't going to sing professionally, I still wanted to study singing and to sing well. What I call the Diamant years began.

Bernard Diamant was one of the great singing teachers of our time. Maureen Forrester studied with him in his early Montreal days, and Mary Lou Fallis worked with him in his later Toronto years. I never studied with Diamant, but three of his students have been wonderful singing teachers for me. The first was Mary Lou Fallis. You may know Mary Lou from her CBC program *The Diva* on Friday afternoons.

Mary Lou Fallis

We had become friends by that time, and I asked her if she would work with me for a while. I will never forget what she said to me at that first lesson. I'd just sung something for her—I think it was the Evening Hymn by Purcell, and she said, "Katharine—that was an absolutely brilliant demonstration of all the tricks singers use to cover up the fact that they have no technique." Although we laughed and laughed, I knew she spoke the truth. My naturally good young voice had served me well up until then, but I knew that I needed a strong and healthy singing technique to sustain my voice over the years to come. And so I embarked on the Diamant technique of placement and resonance.

All singing teachers use imagery to communicate ideas about the physical process of singing because we cannot see most of our vocal apparatus. I still keep in mind some of Mary Lou's images when I'm singing. Mary Lou talked about washing the face with sound. While she was humming, she moved both her hands as if she were washing her face, and imagined that the humming vibrations were following her hands. This imagining enables the sound to find the facial resonance. She also showed me how to pop high notes out the top of my head, to imagine that the sound was coming out of the top of my head and to use my hand flying off my head to help me visualize the physical process. This way of producing a high note doesn't sound great initially, but it taught me to release all the holding habits and tension in my jaw, tongue and throat. That work with Mary Lou began to free up my high notes. Whereas high G used to be a reach for me, now it's not a reach till B or C. That may not seem like a big difference, but those of you who sing will know that it's huge.

Another breakthrough in my work with Mary Lou was liberating the "ah" vowel. You can sing the vowel "ah" in probably a hundred ways, and I'm sure I've hit them all. To illustrate, I'm going to suggest that you say "ah" to yourself in a few different ways. Say "ah" as if you were looking at two little kittens curled up on a pillow. Now say "ah" as if you just discovered you had locked your keys in the car, now as if you were walking alone at night and something brushed against your arm. You see that you do not need to purposely manipulate the lips, the tongue, the throat to produce expressive, specific vowels. You can imagine the perfect pure vowel sound in your mind and then trust your body to produce it for you. Singers can get into trouble when they try too hard to manipulate a vowel. For many years, I'd been having trouble freeing up the "ah" vowel and letting it find it's own placement. One of the songs I'll sing next, *Music For a While* by Purcell, is full of "ah" vowels in the repeated words *fall* and *drop.*

I avoided singing that song for years because of that phrase with all the "drops" before I made friends with the vowel "ah." A distinguishing feature of the song *Music for a While* is that it is composed over a ground bass—a short melodic phrase which is repeated over and over in the piano all through the song.

Video Link

You can listen for that repeated pattern when we perform *Music for a While.* The lyrics of *Music for a While* are by Dryden. In his poem, Dryden refers to Alecto. Perhaps in 1680 everyone knew who Alecto was, but I certainly had to go searching into Graves' *Myths of Greece*. Alecto is one of the furies who relentlessly punishes the deserving dead. She is fearsome to behold, with snakes for hair, and she wields a studded whip. Dryden's suggestion that "music will all your cares beguile until Alecto frees the dead, until the snakes drop from her head and the whip falls from her hand" is his erudite way of saying music will ease our pains until hell freezes over.

Video Link

* * *

Mary Clare Powell (2002) sends her poet to teach her courses because the poet is not afraid to fail, because the poet knows a straight line is not always the best way to get from here to there, because the poet slows her down, because the poet likes questions better than answers and has no use for testing of facts, and, because the poet knows how to take good care of herself. In pondering my own practice, several ways in which I take my singing self into my teaching emerged. Courage, complete engagement, and experiencing research as a transforming agent are three things I've learned from singing which travel with me into each classroom.

Perhaps most importantly, the singer has the courage to go on stage and risk performing again and again. Anything can happen: she can trip on a stair; she can forget the words; she can begin singing a bar too soon or too late or open her mouth and have nothing come out. Each time it is perilous.

One of my favourite aphorisms about teaching comes from the Canadian composer and music educator, Murray Schafer, who says

"Teach on the verge of peril." Over the years I have been building the courage to do that. To me, teaching on the verge of peril means letting go of being in control. It means trusting that the subject itself will engage us and draw us towards learning. It means asking students what they most want to learn, what their biggest questions are, and then changing my course plans, if need be, to honour their interests and needs. It means speaking my mind about political issues. It means continually taking risks, going into class with questions rather than answers, and being willing to say "I haven't thought about that," or "I don't know. Who could help us?" It means fending off the inner voices which say "You're not TEACHING enough; you don't know enough about this."

My training and experience of teaching have taught me that I am responsible for filling the space, for using class time efficiently. It is scary to begin a class knowing that I don't have things ready to fill the space. However, as Rena Upitis has taught me, "Children will, given enough time and an environment that makes it possible, become engaged in meaningful activity without a great deal of direction on the part of the teacher" (Upitis, 1990, p. 28). Through my work with students of all ages, from preschoolers to graduate students, I have come to trust that the space and time will fill with meaningful activity. Palmer (1998) talks about a "not-so-small voice within me [which] insists that if I am not filling all the available space with my own knowledge, I am not earning my keep" (p. 132). I hear that same voice every day and every day have to firmly push it aside. Some days, it is easier than others. The notion that to teach is to create a space for learning has taken on new meaning. It demands my singer-honed courage.

The singer is totally engaged. All parts of her being are required to sing well: the physical, the intellectual, the spiritual, and the emotional. The singer knows how to engage her whole being and the whole beings of her students in the process of teaching. We keep hearing and reading that litany of engaging the physical, the intellectual, the spiritual, and the emotional. What does it mean in the context of my classroom teaching? I offer some current examples.

At the beginning of classes, we do a ball throwing activity I learned in a Waldorf Education course. We begin by standing in a circle. I throw the hackysack ball to one person, whose name I know, and send that person's name along with the ball, speaking it, imagining that the ball is carrying the name to the person. That person, in turn, sends and speaks the ball to someone whose name he or she knows. We do this for at least five minutes. No one feels stressed because the game requires that you know only one other person's name in the whole group. When our

voices, names, and bodies are warmed up, we start to move around the room continuing with the name and ball throwing. In this way, we have all been engaged *physically*, we've had a walk and a stretch, we have all been named, and we have used our voices and lungs in sending names and laughter.

One of the most effective ways I have found to engage students *intellectually* is to keep my mouth shut. A new strategy I've learned from our post-doctoral fellow, Eileen Harris, is called "first and last cards." I am using it in my current Master's course "The Arts in Education." From the preparatory reading, each student writes on a recipe card one quotation that had "juice" or that resonated, or that caused concern. Early on, in class time, we each read the quotation we've written down, one after the other around the room, with no comment. We just sit and listen. Sometimes two or three people will read the same quote. It feels like sitting in the midst of great wisdom. I never want that part of class to end. But it does, and we go on to another activity. We leave the wise words lingering in the air and in our thoughts. At the end of class we all write "last words" on the back of the recipe card. Those last words are about how the shared class experience has reinforced or challenged or changed our thoughts about the quote. I do this along with the students. Then the students pass in their cards, and before next class, I read them, making comments, suggestions for further reading, and asking more questions. My role in the class is not to lecture, but rather to plan varied activities, gauge energy levels, ask good questions for discussion, and be an honest participant in the discussion. These strategies can be remarkably intellectually stimulating for student and teacher alike.

The singer knows that there are many ways to learn something: studying with a teacher, participating in master classes, through imitation, through performing, through experimenting. The singer knows from long experience that learning is a spiral curve, with much revisiting of things such as the "ah" vowel, or how to approach high notes. The singer knows that development takes time, a long time. This singer has been learning to sing for over 50 years, and still has much to learn.

The singer knows that learning anything in depth takes time, knows that tests after three-week-long units are almost meaningless. My teaching, therefore, is open ended. Students are required to choose assignments that are meaningful for them. If a topic from the list of suggestions doesn't interest them, they create their own assignment. Students have choice in readings and can work at a variety of levels. I implore my students to not do anything for the course that feels like a waste of time or "make work." I make sure that every course involves a

guest, a film or video, an art-making component, poetry, role playing, food, opportunities for students to share their expertise and work, and physical activity. Although I don't consciously refer to Gardner's set of multiple intelligences, when I reflect now on the content and activity of the courses I teach, most often each of Gardner's (1983) aspects of intelligence is honoured.

Gardner is still waffling on two additional aspects, one which he calls "spiritual" intelligence. He says "[r]ecently, I've considered two new intelligences. 'Spiritual intelligence' hasn't made it yet, though a form called 'existential intelligence' may qualify" (1997, p. 77). Spirituality is "in." Advertising has caught on to "soul." Certain automobiles have "soul," certain shades of paint or lipstick have "soul," even select computers now have "soul." There is so much surface spirituality that I hesitate to venture in, but I must. Partly as an antidote to the new age pop spirituality, I talk about my understanding of the spiritual dimension in each course I teach.

The spiritual is what is beyond the sensory or emotional dimensions. You cannot see, hear, smell, taste, or touch the spiritual. Take a minute, and think of anything you know about the physical world. You likely experienced it and learned about it through one or more of your senses. But the non-sensory, non-emotional phenomena like creativity, imagination, inspiration, and mystery I consider to be elements and gifts of the spiritual dimension. I consider them to be sacred. To me, all artistic gesture has a spiritual dimension which means that our art work in class engages us *spiritually*.

The singer knows that we learn best when we are emotionally engaged. The singer values memory, knows that you can't really sing a song well until you know it by heart. Think about that phrase. We say "to know something by *heart"* not "to know something by *brain.*" I frequently begin courses by asking students what their most troubling question is in education—something that they feel deeply about. We begin our work together with those questions, with topics based in the students' emotional attachment. I am not afraid to be emotional in class. I am emotional about ideas, about government interference in education, about sterility in schools. I laugh and cry and get angry. So do the students. We are *emotionally* engaged with questions and with each other's ideas in a safe and accepting space. These are some of the ways in which the students and I are drawn into an experience of engagement in many dimensions including the physical, intellectual, spiritual and emotional.

The singer researches what she needs to know. Who is Alecto? Who are the furies? How does one sing Purcell? Why would Purcell use a repeated pattern as an accompaniment, whereas Schubert made the piano sound like water rushing over stones in a stream? How do the answers to those questions affect the singer's interpretation of a song? The singer knows that research can transform practice in profound ways. As a teacher, I know that research can transform practice in profound ways. It was my research on play in early childhood that started me on the path of "teaching" less and providing more space for learning. When I read research on teaching and learning, the results, implications, and recommendations sometimes make me uncomfortable when they challenge my own practice. As a singer, I know how to experiment. I might need to try a particular phrase many different ways, let go of a long held habit, or be willing to try the seemingly strange things a teacher will suggest. I have to let go of sounding good for awhile, while I try out and learn different strategies and techniques. So I have learned, as a singer and as a teacher, to be willing to experiment, willing to learn, and willing to change my practice.

The singer knows the cleansing and nourishing effects of singing, knows that an endeavour which summons the whole being can transform fatigue into energy, lethargy into engagement, despair into possibility, and lack of focus into sense of self. So, like Powell, I realise that I have always taken my singer to teach my classes, even though I was doing it unaware. What I am ultimately learning through singing and through teaching is what Powell suggests education is really about: "…developing a fullness of self, believing in and knowing your own power. Strengthening your inner life and developing an outward expression that sustains not just yourself, but others, a life that has depth and wonder to it" (p. 363).

References

Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences.* New York: Basic Books.

Gardner, H. (1997). Learning and the imagination. *The Touchstone Centre Journal*, 71-90.

Palmer, P. J. (1998). *The courage to teach.* San Fransisco: Jossey-Bass.

Powell, M.C. (2002). Why I take my poet to teach my courses. In E. Mirochnik & D.C. Sherman (Eds.), *Passion and pedagogy* (pp. 349-364). New York: Peter Lang.

Upitis, R. (1990). *This too is music.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.