

Singing: The Human Connection

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Abstract

Though music may not be a universal language, it is a facet that can help us understand each other across cultures, languages, and borders. This project explores the experiences in singing and teaching voice lessons of individuals in different parts of the world. It was designed as a case study not to analyze individual's experiences as a representation of the whole, but rather as a point of comparison between individual experiences in different parts of the world. Through interviews with people who have sung or taught singing in Italy, Chile, Canada, and the United States, cultural values and practices of singing are compared. This study was conducted over the course of several months using virtual meeting technology. Each interview was recorded with the express permission of the subjects and the recordings were analyzed after all the interviews were collected. The interview answers reveal several connections and contrasts between the individual subjects. Some interviewees found different aspects of singing and learning to sing more important than others, such as lesson pacing (technique versus repertoire) and preparation (performing versus rehearsing). There were also many similarities that resonated in each singer's experience around the world. For instance, all subjects discussed the mind-body connection that is experienced in singing. Even though certain values varied between subjects, this study highlights the connection that different individuals have with their voice as part of their identity as a human in the world.

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Introduction

Music can be found in some way, shape, or form in nearly every human civilization across time. While that does not necessarily make music a universal language, there is something unique about music, and singing specifically, that it has an important place in nearly every culture. Studies have been conducted exploring the relationship between human culture and music. There are variations in the way people interpret music and in the function of music in their culture, society, and history (Feld & Fox, 1994). There are also variations in the ways human beings use their voice, both their speaking/singing voice and their vocal power to speak their truth (Feld & Fox, 1994). There are different cultural uses for the voice and a variety of associations and experiences that people share through singing. Throughout all these connections and differences, one aspect that can connect us is the human voice. Many studies have been done on the influence singing can have on language learning (see Good, Russo, & Sullivan, 2015; Ludke, 2009; Matsu, 2022; Zbikowski, 2012). The literature review shows that there is a gap in publications of qualitative research focused on the perceptions and experiences of singers, teachers, and lovers of music.

This research explores the connections in singing through individual experiences around the world. In this study, five participants with different international singing

experiences were interviewed. They were asked about the logistics, philosophy, and culture of their voice lessons. Subjects had experiences singing or teaching voice lessons in Chile, Switzerland, Montreal, Ontario, Italy, and the United States. Each participant offers an individual perspective on their experience singing in each culture.

The background of this research comes from my personal experience singing internationally. As an undergraduate vocalist, I researched opportunities to continue my vocal studies while studying abroad in Valparaíso, Chile. A couple weeks into my semester, I arrived at my first audition to take voice lessons at a conservatory. I had a certain expectation for how the audition would be set up and what lessons would look like: there would be a piano; there would be a classroom or studio space; there would be a voice teacher at the piano or an accompanist; they would use [what I had been taught was] “standard” repertoire. I also assumed that it would not be a problem that I was only going to be there for 6 months. These assumptions and expectations quickly disappeared after not recognizing the set up inside the audition: no piano; a huge, crowded room inside of a palace-like space; no recognizable repertoire. Before I sang one note, I was asked to leave the audition. The conservatory model in Valparaíso required years of study with the same teacher, and I was hoping to study for a few months. Looking back on that experience now, I did not speak the musical and cultural language fluently and had not considered that cultural differences could extend to something like voice lessons.

This oversight sparked my curiosity: What are voice lessons like in other places? What do other people experience in solo singing lessons? Why do people sing?

The participants in this study shared their experiences in studying and teaching voice in different countries and cultures. Paola is a singer from Chile; Agnus is a singer who lived in Italy for 8-10 years and took voice lessons; Kerby is a singer from the US who studied abroad in Italy for a semester and took voice lessons; Catherine teaches and performs in the US and grew up singing in Ontario, CA; and Daniel is from and teaches in Ontario, CA and has studied/taught in Montreal and Switzerland. I asked what led them to want to study or teach singing, the logistical set-up of their voice lessons, what sort of repertoire/genres do they sing or assign to students, and lastly, what is important to them about singing. It is important to note that each individual person is not meant to represent the experience of an entire country or culture, but rather to serve as a tool in comparing individual experiences throughout the world and to aid in exploring the threads that connect us.

Experiences singing in Chile

Paola is a Chilean singer from outside of Santiago. She studies voice in her university and through chorus. When I asked her why she chooses to sing, she told me that she has always loved music. Although she plays the guitar and the ukulele, she loves to sing the most because of the text and poetry. As singers, we have the luxury, responsibility, and privilege of communicating with text. This connection to the text that Paola expressed is not unique; other vocalists whom I interviewed shared this experience as well.

Paola's lessons take place in a group setting. The teacher instructs from the piano, and they are in a large recital hall space. Students typically sing art and folk songs in Spanish and sometimes English. Paola's favorite songs to sing are folk songs in Spanish. One reason for this could be that she is able to connect with the songs on a deeper level because it is her native language.

The last question I asked was, "What is important to you about singing? Why is it important to you that you sing?" This is what she said:

[Translated, Original: Spanish] "For me singing is very, very important. I feel that music in general is for everyone. And I feel that it is part of my life because it is very powerful and strong. One connects with very profound things when one relates the song, the melody, and the lyrics with their life experiences. For me, it is a liberation. It is part of me."

Paola touches on the idea that singing is something available for everyone and that she feels embodied when singing. These are observations that I found in other interviews as well.

Experiences singing in Canada and Europe

Daniel is a countertenor who sings all over the world. It was natural for him to study music and teach voice because he grew up in a musical family. As both a performer and teacher, Daniel offers another perspective to this topic. When he meets a new voice student for the first time, the first lesson is often mostly talking: getting to know what their musical and non-musical interests are and why they are taking lessons. He said that he tries to not ask too much in the first lesson because it is important that they have a chance to sing. He chooses repertoire using the student's interests and experiences for guidance and he focuses on singing in languages that they speak so that they have a solid understanding of the meaning of the piece. This is one of the connections he shares with Paola, who expressed her preference for singing in her native language.

Daniel also has education and teaching experience in Europe because he studied in Switzerland and has performed in several countries. Curious about the differences he experienced, I asked about the contrasts between North American voice lessons and singing in Europe. He said his main observation was the fundamental understanding that the European singers have of the music from Europe. The example he gave was hearing Mahler's Fifth Symphony in Germany performed by German singers. He described it as an emotionally transformative experience because the singers were able to dig deeper into the meaning of the music due to stronger cultural connections with the music and the text. The relation that can be made when there is a deep understanding of the culture and language of a piece is a reoccurring theme in these interviews.

I asked Daniel why he teaches singing and why his singing is important to him. His response is as follows:

“I really think that we want to explore a really safe and life-affirming teaching... I really mean the pedagogy: literally how we think of vocal technique and repertoire learning. I think all these things can support health. I think we can just go ahead and heal the world.”

Similar to Paola, Daniel touches on his experience of singing being a universal sensation. His answer varies as he explores this observation through the lens of teaching vocal technique and repertoire. Daniel equates singing to supporting health which has been explored in other studies as well.

I also interviewed my voice teacher and research mentor, Dr. Catherine Gardner, about her experience in teaching music in the United States in comparison to her experience growing up singing in Ontario, Canada. Catherine was in many choirs and took piano lessons when she was younger. In university she focused on vocal performance, but when she started teaching private lessons after graduation, she realized that she really loved it. She said that she learned things about her own voice while teaching others. When I asked about how she chooses repertoire, she told me about the graded system of music in Canada called the Royal Conservatory of Music. Students progress through the books and each book has repertoire picked out by voice teachers that are appropriate for each level. This is a resource that comes from voice teachers who have a better awareness for the needs and ability levels of voice students. Catherine also emphasized the importance of choosing repertoire that is diverse and represents composers of color, LGBTQIA+ composers, and minorities in traditional western music.

Her response to the final question about the importance of singing resonated with much of what had been touched on in other interviews while adding some new ideas as well:

“For me as a person, the awareness of my experience being a human in my body I think is something that singing has brought me that I don’t know if I would have found if I was not a singer: How do I feel? Am I breathing? How do I feel about this poetry? How do I want to express it? Just being in touch with my feelings and my physical body. I think we all can benefit from being aware of who we are in our bodies. But then I also think we get the privilege of expressing beautiful poetry, text, and a whole range of feelings to audiences or whoever is listening to us who maybe do not have the same tools to express that but have all those feelings. It feels good as a singer to say out loud these words that express the human experience and then also to know that the audience is taking that in and helping them process being a human in the world.”

Catherine, similarly to Paola, talks about the experience of feeling embodied through singing because it is a physical experience. She also expresses how important it is to communicate the poetry and text through song.

Experiences singing in the United States and Italy

My last two interviews were with Kerby and Agnus. Kerby is a voice teacher in the US who studied for a few months in Italy during her undergraduate degree with an Italian voice teacher. Kerby described her voice lessons as taking place in the school where they lived and took their other classes. One distinct difference she noticed in her Italian

lessons in comparison to her lessons in the US was the schedule. Her voice lessons in the US always began and ended on time whereas in Italy, “things took the time they took.” If they were at a stopping point early, the lesson ended earlier, if they needed more time, they took more time. The biggest take away she learned from those lessons (that she still incorporates into her singing and teaching) is the emphasis on style and the importance of the story in the song that her Italian teachers taught. During her time in Italy, she mostly sang in Italian in order to gain a deeper understanding of Italian music and culture. Kerby discussed the influences of a larger culture on her singing experience. This may be because she is thinking more about the differences and factors that impact those experiences, coming from a different culture and frame of reference.

I asked Kerby about why she sings, and she shared:

“One of the biggest reasons I love singing right now in my life...is because I feel like it really connects me to my body. I feel very mindful and embodied when I am singing. I’ve always been really attracted to the balance of science and art that is singing... the balance of technique and thinking and logic with the endgame of music which is to make meaningful artistic music. I also feel this duty to keep it alive...with online media it becomes a little bit more difficult to consume art that is meant to be experienced live with bodies in the room. I feel very drawn to this idea of staying in the art so that it doesn’t die, and some people are reminded that it’s awesome and that it’s worth the ticket price and the communal experience.”

Similar to Catherine and Paola, Kerby is impacted by the physicality and the experience she has in her body as she sings. She also presents the experience of being on the receiving end of a live performance and how important it is to her as a performer and audience member.

The last participant, Agnus, studied in Italy under different circumstances than Kerby, however, there were a lot of similarities between their stories. Agnus went to Italy to study Italian and took lessons in Italian to practice her language skills and vocal technique. She focused on the old Italian art songs because she wanted to learn them the “Italian way.” When I asked her about what she meant by the “Italian way,” she gave an answer that was similar to Kerby’s: singing the song with style and with a true understanding of what the text means. She studied with three different voice teachers while she was in Italy, travelling back and forth over a period of 8-10 years.

For Agnus, these are the important elements of singing:

“The communication part [is important]. I think the words and how to get the meaning across, I mean the music of course is important too, but the words are so very important. I think that comes across with the Italian teachers, they want those words to come out and the sense of the song. I guess it’s a communication thing.”

Her response focused on the ability to communicate the feeling and meaning behind the text expressively, similar to Catherine’s response.

Conclusion

This study highlights the similarities and differences found in five individual singing experiences around the globe. Each participant described the importance of feeling fully embodied while singing. Many observed the responsibility and privilege of expressing poetry and its meaning through their voice and music. Some participants described the value of singing in their native languages while others preferred to sing in a diverse selection of languages. Some participants found value in having a deep understanding of the text and being able to communicate effectively due to their familiarity with the language. They also elaborated on the differences in structure and logistics of the lesson, including group versus individual lessons, emphasis on different repertoire and techniques, and the types of pedagogy used.

Personal perspectives of bodily autonomy and awareness of self through the experiences of singing and teaching singing is a subject that deserves further exploration. There have been many studies done about the scientific and neurological aspects of singing and few about the emotions and sensations felt while singing. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of singers' experiences performing, studying, and teaching in their body and in the world.

An expansion of this study could include voices and perspective from other parts of the world including but not limited to Asia, Africa, Australia, Central and Eastern Europe, and other parts of Latin America. Although there were differences in the participants' experiences in learning and teaching singing in their respective cultures, much of the structure and repertoire remained similar to the western music tradition that has integrated into much of the world due to factors such as colonization (Ingle, 2017). This research opens further questions about the value of singing in other languages, the meaning that can get lost in the translation and presentation of songs, and how history has affected the value and use of singing around the world.

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Marguerite Olivia Hemedinger earned a Bachelor of Music in Music Education and a Bachelor of Arts in Hispanic Studies from East Carolina University in North Carolina, United States of America. Hemedinger presented the research titled *Singing: A Human Connection* at the 2022 Research and Creative Achievement Week conference at East Carolina University and at the 2022 Global Issues Conference.