

Voice-Movement Skills Onstage and Off, for Performers in Theatre, Music, and Dance

1st Auxiliary Study

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Objective: When singers and dancers use voice in performance, they need the same physical/vocal skills as actors, who frequently need to sing. And performers in all three categories use voice-movement skills to teach, audition, present, and communicate with colleagues. Yet, curricula for singers rarely include speech or movement, dance curricula lack voice, and actors lack singing. Focusing on genres missing from the pilot project, this auxiliary study investigated performer perspectives on voice-movement skills after two weeks of integrative training.

Design: Four professional performers (two actors, two singers) participated in a 90-minute class after videoing one minute of individual performance. Over the next two weeks, they had two one-hour sessions each with the Principal Investigator, then recorded another performance before contributing to a videoed discussion of responses to the training.

Results: Subjects focused on areas of particular interest, e.g., speaking Shakespeare, the relation of acting, singing, speaking, and moving, and the dimension of *play* in preparation and performance. Accessing a wide pitch range, having the freedom to move, and allowing the *body* to speak, facilitated technical efficiency and a commitment of spirit.

Conclusions: Performances post-training were far more compelling than initial recordings.

Based on the videoed discussion and researcher observations, participants benefitted from: (1) exploring integrative work with a sense of freedom and *play*; (2) practical information on breath management and shape changes in the vocal tract; (3) attention to speech details; and (4) connecting directly with other performance views.

Key words: voice-movement, integrative, breath management, vocal tract, singing, speaking, moving, theatre, music, dance, Shakespeare, play

INTRODUCTION

When singers and dancers use voice in performance, they need the same physical/vocal skills as actors, who frequently have to sing. And performers in all three categories use voice-movement skills in auditions, teaching, presenting, and communicating with colleagues. Yet, curricula for singers rarely include speech or movement, dance curricula lack voice, and singing is often missing from actor training. As a result, gifted performers may be highly skilled in some areas and justly apprehensive in others!

Integrative training brings it all together and fills in gaps, so that performers can meet a wide range of physical/vocal demands. Yoga, Pilates, and other movement modalities connect with voicing in any position, moving or still,¹ while the use of language and an element of *play* are inherent in the mix.²

The purpose of this research was to compare perspectives across disciplines after a brief period of training. To date, voice research has focused primarily in the direction of singing, whereas the current project embraced all vocal tasks, their physicality, and their relation to movement.³ The research questions were:

1. Given their respective skill sets and specializations, how will participants differ in their response to integrative training?
2. How will individual performers use information in similar or different ways?
3. How will relating across techniques make for greater efficiency, ease, and freedom for all participants?

Based on studies with actors (Nilsson, Laukkanen, Syriä 2020,⁴ Melton, Bradford, Lee 2020⁵), singers (Melton, Bradford, Lee 2021,⁶ Steinhauer, McDonald, Estill 2017,⁷ Thurman, Welch, Theimer, Klitzke 2004⁸), dancers (Hass 2019,⁹ Melton 2015,¹⁰ Wozny 2014¹¹), and related theatre artists (Melton, Tom 2022,¹² Berry 2008,² Wise, Pikes 2001¹³), expectations were that:

- Clarification regarding efficient breath management and shape changes in the vocal tract would positively impact both vocal sound and ease of movement
- Knowing a wide pitch range is available for speaking as well as singing would contribute to ease and the ability to *play* vocally

- Allowing the *body* and spirit to express would lead to personal discoveries and greater confidence overall

Dancers in the pilot project worked in multiple genres, while actors and singers tended toward specialization. This qualitative, auxiliary study was designed to broaden the range of performance genres represented by actors and singers.

METHODOLOGY

Design

In a large rehearsal studio at the National Opera Center, New York City, four professional performers (two actors, two singers), all in good health and widely different in age, experience, and specialization, took part in the following activities:

1. Subjects video recorded approximately one minute each of performance (their choice), before participating in a 90-minute voice-movement class led by the Principal Investigator.
2. Over the next two weeks, each subject had two one-hour sessions with the Principal Investigator.
3. At the end of two weeks, subjects again recorded one minute of performance each (the same or different material from #1), then contributed to a videoed discussion of individual responses to the training.

Video recordings were for reference only.

Subjects

Three participants were from the US; one was from Mexico. All subjects had done one or more degree programs in the US. Actors had experience with both classical and contemporary material. Singer 1 was a Wagnerian soprano and international performer; Singer 2 was an actor in theatre and film, as well as a music theatre performer.

Material

Actor 1 did monologues from *The Cake* (Brunstetter) and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (Shakespeare); Actor 2 did a monologue from *Measure for Measure* (Shakespeare). Singer 1 did “Barak, mein Mann” from *Die Frau ohne Schatten* by Richard Strauss, “Allein! weh, ganz

allein!” from *Elektra*, also by Strauss, and Sprechstimme “Und ist kein betrüg” from *Wozzeck* by Alban Berg. Singer 2 did Prince Hal monologues from *Henry IV, Part 1* (Shakespeare), and sang “It All Fades Away,” from *The Bridges of Madison County*.

Instrumentation

Individual performances were videoed using Photo Booth. The final discussion was recorded with an iPhone 13-PRO (2021 Model), along with Standard LED (10" Size) Light Ring, Raya FRB-USB-10.

RESULTS

Subjects focused on areas of particular interest, e.g., speaking Shakespeare, the relation of acting, singing, speaking, and moving, and the dimension of *play* in preparation and performance.² Accessing a wide pitch range,^{5,6} having the freedom to move,⁵ and allowing the *body* to speak,¹³ facilitated both technical efficiency and a commitment of spirit.

DISCUSSION

Participant responses

Singer 1 led off with a superb description of her changed “order of operations” regarding learning and performing:

Being a classical singer,...learning a piece and performing is end out. You start with mechanics of the innermost part of you, and that comes out into what you're saying, how you're saying it, and what the music is. Then usually, the last little bit that you get to sooner or later, maybe, is the theatrical intent. What I've been doing over the past two weeks is reversing that. I would start with just nonsense movement and sound, then add the theatrical intent, thinking about how I could do that with the music, and how I would produce that on the inside. What I found very interesting is how much I retained of that first freedom, whereas normally, if I feel like everything is not bubbling correctly, it gets pulled in, and that's all I'm thinking about. With what I recorded today, I have no idea what words were coming out of my mouth because I was all about what they mean to me...But it didn't bother me so much because I felt like the intent, it was all working together, whereas normally that would've stopped me..

Piggybacking off that, Singer 2 said:

As an actor, you have to build the script analysis, of course, and understand what's going on, and at the end of that, maybe you have a set idea of how it has to be but that's not fueling you as you do the performance. So, the physical work was just so free... You said, "Do a pose," and somehow my mind put it together and created meaning out of the thing in which I found freedom... and blew open the notion of what any moment *had* to be. There was no pressure on it, but the intelligence of my body found meaning and new possibilities through that work, which was incredible. As a process, as a technique, I know I could go back to this.

Actor 2 responded:

One of the things I'm hearing and resonate with is *freedom*, but I sometimes need to practice that, as weird as it sounds, like the practice of letting go. There's a transition between being consciously competent and unconsciously competent.

Singer 1:

Yes, it's the difference between talking about walking and walking.

Actor 1:

Two things happened for me: 1) in the singing exercises, I had to let go and be more in the body. Then, 2) with classical text, I needed to be more precise in the pre-work to find freedom and flow in the speech.

Thus began a rare discourse on accents and dialects in singing and speaking, and of performing the same text in more than one language. Singing was new to Actors 1 and 2, and speech perspectives on text are different from diction for singers. A topic touched upon, but not explored was the relation of vowels and consonants in a range of contexts.

Pitch and volume were up next. Actors 1 and 2 were surprised and delighted at how easily they sang 2 ½ - 3 octaves while dancing and moving about. From Actor 1:

My takeaway is that it's okay to hear a different sound from what you've ever heard before because you've never done it before. You can let your voice surprise you!

When performers have not studied singing, especially classical, or legit singing, they often produce loud sounds that are harsh and out of character. From Actor 2: "Actors get told you have

to hit the back of the theatre, so it's like, well, how do I do that?" Even a little work on efficient breath management and "opening" the throat can undo that habit.^{4, 13}

Singer 2 said:

When you're fully warmed up and in your whole range, you rise to the occasion, the bigness of the moment—a prince is going to be king of England—you fill it in organically, rather than pushing.

Singer 1: We call that *resonance*.

Near the end of the session, an unusual question arose—and answers are still coming in! "Actors learn to adjust to a wide range of acoustic environments and media, but singers frequently do not. Why is that?"

Singer 1:

Singers learn *not* to adjust. You sing the way you sing, regardless of the space; otherwise, you're not going to do what you mean to do.

Lively discourse began as we moved chairs and reordered the room! A separate article will explore the question further.

Research limitations

As with any research project, there were limitations, which inspire us to plan future enquiries.

Limitations in the current study included:

Only four participants were available for the two-week period, whereas six were originally planned.

While the range of genres was increased from the pilot project, the view of a gig singer was still missing.

CONCLUSIONS

Given their respective skill sets and specializations:

- Actors found technical specificity to be extremely helpful in the areas of breath management, vocal tract shape, articulation, and phrasing.
- Singers found improvised movement and a sense of play to be highly useful in the learning process.

Within categories:

- Singing exercises opened a new door for Actors 1 and 2, provided essential information about their innate musical abilities, and clarified the relation of speaking and singing.
- Accessing the intelligence of the body proved a powerful tool for both singers. Singer 1 was able to shift from a held singer's stance to movement appropriate to the moment. Singer 2 transformed from classical to more contemporary material with ease and skill.

Across disciplines:

- Connecting with other performance views and exploring beyond their accustomed processes provided additional knowledge and understanding of performance as a whole.

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