31 situArte

Aligning Vocal Pedagogical Bodies of Knowledge in Singing-Lesson Experiences

Alineando cuerpos pedagógicos vocales de conocimiento en clases de canto

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Abstract

Vocal pedagogy is an emerging academic discipline that is rapidly gaining traction as a rigorous and relevant body of knowledge. However, its knowledge often lacks the rigorous legitimacy required for academic credibility. The Western craft of teaching singing and vocal skills has a long history and is deeply rooted in practical experience. This paper explores academic writers' concerns for legitimizing practical arts practice in academia and higher education institutions. The paper uses phenomenological research on female adolescent singers' experiences to illustrate how this practical-theoretical alignment can be negotiated. This alignment between rigorous credibility and voice teaching can be seen as a dilemma or consideration.

Keywords: Vocal Pedagogy, Practitioner Research, Academic Rigour, Vocal Studies, Music Didactics.

Resumen

La pedagogía vocal es una disciplina académica emergente que está ganando terreno rápidamente como cuerpo de conocimiento riguroso y relevante. Sin embargo, sus conocimientos carecen a menudo de la rigurosa legitimidad que exige la credibilidad académica. El oficio occidental de enseñar a cantar y las habilidades vocales tiene una larga historia y está profundamente arraigado en la experiencia práctica. Este artículo explora la preocupación de los escritores académicos por legitimar la práctica artística en el mundo académico y en las instituciones de enseñanza superior. El artículo utiliza una investigación fenomenológica sobre las experiencias de cantantes adolescentes para ilustrar cómo se puede negociar este alineamiento práctico-teórico. Esta alineación entre la credibilidad rigurosa y la enseñanza de la voz puede verse como un dilema o una consideración.

Palabras clave: Pedagogía vocal, investigación práctica, rigor académico, estudios vocales, didáctica de la música.

Introduction

Although academic research in Western Vocal Pedagogy (VP) could be considered an emergent academic field within Higher Education (HE) institutions, the Western craft of teaching voice students dates back centuries (Nelson, 2013; Oram, 2015; Winter, 2021 & 2023). This tacit and culturally embedded vocational craft has been taught, learned, used, and passed on from teachers to numerous generations of students. However, there is concern within the VP research field that HE institutions may put more importance on more scientific, theoretical, and positivist research. The Western vocal craft is learned practically but institutions need to rely on funding that is often awarded for research that meets the criteria of traditional academic and peer-reviewed research (Oram, 2015). This could result in less credence being given to material knowledge (how-to teaching books, blogs, websites) that record the experiences, accumulated learning, and generational practice that singing teachers bring to the field of Western VP and its research.

The tension between the two strands of VP understanding (practical and theoretical) has implications for VP research because of VPs' emergent nature. This paper considers the possible tensions within this practical and theoretical knowledge alignment and whether this is a consideration within my current research into female adolescent vocal agency within singing lessons.

VP as an artifact of history and culture

Western VP is a centuries-old product of its culture. In his book detailing the history of English Choristers, Mould (2007, p. 1) writes, "During the first millennium BC the Jews had maintained a song school in which not only men but also Levite boys were trained to sing". He writes that, from 531 AD, the Christian church educated boys to read Latin, the Psalter, and the Liturgy which was chanted in a song-like manner. Until the mid-12th century, young children were gifted to the church as oblates, and in the 12th and 13th centuries, the choristers were an important part of the secular English cathedrals: "the sound of young choristers was deemed to resemble the pure sound of angels" (Mould, 2017, p. 24). Potter & Sorrell (2012, p. 38) write: "The church was a powerful means of disseminating developments in singing, and the learning of the chant corpus required an institutional pedagogy which developed its own criteria for good singing".

"The need for singing training arose in response to the desire for greater excellence in the performing art" (O'Bryan & Harrison, 2014, p. 1). The virtuosic singer started to come into prominence in the sixteenth century and music learning conservatories were developed to train singers in this specialized and reified performing style (O'Bryan & Harrison, 2014; Potter & Sorrell, 2012; Stark,

1999). This specialized way of singing (known as *Bel Canto*), developed from the growing understanding that "the human voice could be used in extraordinary ways and set virtuoso singers apart from amateur and choral singers, and resulted in a new kind of expression" (Stark, 1999, p. xvii).

The eighteenth century saw the printing and distribution of *Bel Canto* method books. The first author of these method books was Pier Francesco Tosi (1653-1732) who took this 'secret' craft, codified it, and made it accessible to everyone (Potter & Sorrell, 2012). As opera houses began to develop, the *Bel Canto* sound required by the composers and audiences needed to change. The larger performing spaces required a bigger type of voice. It also marked the decline of the castrati singers and the enablement of more female singers' careers (O'Bryan & Harrison, 2014).

The conservatory master-apprentice model of learning the Western style of singing is still often the standard structure of voice lessons today. It can be found in private singing studios and is not isolated to conservatories alone (Lentini, 2020; O'Bryan & Harrison, 2014). Potter & Sorrell (2012) write that despite compositional styles changing over time, many aspects of singing teaching have remained constant until today. This demonstrates the very culturally embedded nature of Western singing teaching and the practical applications of VP. Even if there is no need for the historical implications to be explicitly shown within VP research, it always lies implicitly and symbolically below the surface. One cannot separate the historical significance of Western VP from the practice, or its research. The reason for research often comes from and is informed by the practice which is historically and culturally embedded.

When examining the lesson space, we should consider both its observable and symbolic aspects. We should also consider the two players positioned within that space: the teacher and the student. Not only is that space a concrete place with physical props that exists within time and space, but it is also a cognitive and meta-space that is imbued and embedded with centuries-old historic culture, expectation, values, beliefs, and enculturation that has been "informed by 400 years of singing pedagogy traditions" (O'Bryan, 2014, p. 21).

Examining the singing lesson space

Swanwick (1999, p. 23) writes that we do not just react to an environment: "Whether physical or cultural… we also reflect upon our experience". The space is the area that holds shared symbolic meaning and enables new meanings via access to these symbolic systems. "Space, in and of itself, does not evoke a reaction until it becomes the background to something perceived as consequential" (Gains, 2006, p. 174). Knowledge and new meanings develop when language and objects are integrated into cognition via the medium of the lesson space. Thus, the lesson space operates on both the concrete-observable as well as the abstract-symbolic levels simultaneously. One

cannot exist without the other. We are both passively in a space and actively engaged with its cognitive symbolism. The lesson space is both physically occupied and acts as a meta-conduit for knowledge.

The players do not come into that space from a void, nor is the student's emptiness filled by the teacher's pedagogy. Instead, both the teacher and student are already filled and influenced by constructed musical, social, cultural, gendered, and personal meanings, and values. One could say that the student's knowledge is overlayed by additional knowledge within the lessons. The student is shown an object concept. That student conceptualizes an awareness of the object concept and that object concept's structure is changed as it is incorporated into the cognitive and embodied constructions within the student (Vygotsky, 1934; Hargreaves et al., 2002). In this way, we are constantly constructed and reconstructed as we come across new people and new concepts. This applies to a Western pedagogical tradition that is hundreds of years old and still influences how singing is taught within many Western studios.

Aubert's (2007, p. 22) definition of traditional music relates to *Bel Canto* as it too is a "living form, endowed of an inexhaustible creative potential, and the bearer of a set of values which confer on it identity, originality, and symbolic scope". He further defines musical knowledge as not genetic. Rather, "it results entirely from the domain of cultural acquisition". Musical learning occurs through a "progressive impregnation as naturally as spoken language" (Aubert, 2007, pp. 69-70). This reification of stylistic vocal quality "requires a highly refined use of laryngeal, respiratory, and articulatory muscles to produce special qualities of timbre, evenness of scale and register, breath control, flexibility, tremulousness, and expressiveness" (Stark, 1999, pp. xx-xxi). Although Western cultural singing lessons are not restricted to the conservatories and are just as common within private music studios, the master-apprentice model is still considered the "primary mode of learning [Western] singing" (O'Bryan & Harrison, 2014, p. 2).

One should also consider that *Bel Canto* is not the only style in which Western singing students are taught. Students can have lessons in a variety of styles and genres and there are now many new and readily available modes of learning that include, but are not limited to, online videos. However, O'Bryan & Harrison (2014) suggest that the master-apprentice model is still the main model in which singing students are instructed within Western culture.

On the concrete and observable level, "A great singing lesson has FORM" (Fisher, 2015). The explicit form of the lesson takes place within time and space and simultaneously operates on a symbolic level that is historically and culturally implicit. However one can better understand the implicit aspects of the lesson via the acknowledgment of the explicit aspects of the lesson. Both explicit and implicit aspects are inseparably entwined. In his online blog, Fisher (2015, para. 7) advises that a lesson

should have the following format: "Vocal warm up – Skill building – Application in song". This format is essential for an effective singing lesson. His blog is a concise and instructional example of how a lesson could be facilitated. It is a pedagogical artifact based on Fisher's (2015) years of experience as a vocal coach. It is also a personalized lesson plan based upon a historic vocal pedagogical model and can be adjusted according to each student's vocal needs.

Within the singing lesson are positioned two people: the teacher and the student. Within this space, these two players interact: "The one-to-one singing lesson might be defined at its simplest as the transmission of music skills from an expert singer to a novice learner so that the learner eventually develops those same skills" (O'Bryan, 2014, p. 21). A study by Duffy & Healey (2017) compared how teachers and students interacted within in-person and online one-to-one music lessons. They found that the perception of space and the use of non-verbal cues were significantly different in both lesson settings. In both in-person and online remote instrumental lessons, the student was instructed in a one-to-one setting and by a specialist instrumental teacher. In-person lessons were conducted in one room in which both players interacted with each other and the music. The music stand, its position in the room, and its relation to the student and teacher played a vital part in the visual and pedagogical makeup of the lesson.

Duffy & Healey (2017, p. 13) noted that there was evidence of a "collaborative system of turn-taking" where only one person would speak at a time. In contrast, online lessons were conducted remotely, and both the student and the teacher were situated within their own private spaces while interacting together within a virtual space. A primary differentiation between the two lesson spaces was that there was a latency in relaying speech during the remote lessons which resulted in less efficient turn-taking and more interruptions by the student due to an "inability to predict when the tutor's instructional turn was complete" (Duffy & Healey, 2017, p. 17).

Regardless of being in-person or remote, the space is observable within time and space. There is a mutual understanding between the student and the teacher of how the lesson should function, as demonstrated by the student and teacher's use (or observed frustrationally lack) of turn-taking. The space operates as a symbolic and active zone that enables the student to build the skills required to produce the expected and desired cultural sounds. The two observable lesson spaces (physical and virtual) required adjustments by both players to enable the facilitation of the lesson, but the lessons still operated on both an observable level as well as a symbolic level which enabled the behavior adjustments required to facilitate optimal teaching and learning.

An observable lesson is intertwined with the unobservable and meta-cognitive-habitus-imbued symbolic space in which a student enters as an already constructed and musically influenced individual with

certain expectations. The purpose of the lesson is to instruct the student in a particular style of singing for whatever outcome is needed or wanted by the teacher and/or student. The teacher comes into that space with the expectation of instructing and vocally constructing the student and each teacher approaches singing teaching according to their own pedagogical beliefs, experience, and habitus. However, regardless of how they teach and what their pedagogical opinions are, they are still rooted and based upon an entrenched cultural and historic Western craft. Chandler (2014) wrote that there are fundamental differences between teaching classical and contemporary styles.

In contrast, Goldsack (2014, p. 51) wrote: "My long-term aim for all young voices is to establish a strong technique that is healthy, beautiful, gives versatility and access to all styles of music". Chandler (2014, p. 35) advocates for a more specialist treatment of contemporary pedagogical knowledge and instruction: "While contemporary singing shares commonalities with other singing styles, the specifics are distinctive and non-generic". Both Goldsack's (2014) and Chandler's (2014) written opinions are based on their pedagogical knowledge and are part of the skills and values that they wish to impart to their singing students. Their opinions are also grounded on a historical and cultural vocal learning reference point that is commutable and understood within Western VP. This cultural-historic reference point enables vocal pedagogues to have different opinions because of the deep entrenchment of Western VP in Western history and culture. It also enables their chosen (dis)adherence to traditional Western pedagogy within the lesson space and how/what they teach within it.

This is further illustrated in a study by Dwyer (2015) who analyzed a general class music teacher's values and belief systems. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theories on habitus, Dwyer (2015) suggests that this belief system was put in place by the teacher's own past music-specializing experiences and external social and institutional forces. Additionally, these dominant systems were supported by the institution in which the teacher worked. These systems influenced how and what the teacher imparted to the students. Although unaware that they were doing it, the teacher overrode the student's pre-existing musical tastes and knowledge and made them discount their personal values and beliefs to participate successfully in the lessons.

With those pre-existing systems negated, the teacher then was able to transmit and reproduce the dominant musical values and belief systems that they had learned when originally specializing in their musical field. Dwyer's (2015) analysis of the case study looked at how the teacher's awareness of these exposed beliefs disrupted their assumptions and previously taken-for-granted beliefs. This meta-awareness enabled the teacher to better adapt to and legitimize the students' pre-existing tacit knowledge.

Dwyer's (2015) case study found that they were able to disrupt the limitations of their teaching style through the self-analysis of their teaching practice. Chapman (2012) suggests that singing teachers should continue to learn and develop their teaching skills and knowledge to enable more creativity in their lessons. Similarly, Lentini (2020) wrote that she chooses to teach differently from how she was taught and Goldsack (2014, p. 9) writes, "Continual self-assessment of one's teaching methods is vital but, as with singing performance, refreshing one's ideas, methods and preconceptions as a teacher is not easy and cannot be self-generated". In other words: a singing teacher may teach restrictively due to their habitus, or they can disrupt that habitus by being more reflective of their practice and being adaptive to the varying needs of each student. A study conducted by Morgan (2019) demonstrated research that stemmed from a personal reflective pedagogical practice. The results of the research enabled her to examine her personal pedagogy and to become more aware of "formative experiences and unconscious bias" that potentially affected the progress of her singing students (Morgan, 2019, p. 9).

My previous research (Magnin, 2016) into the motivations for pre-adolescent singing students to begin and continue singing lessons also came from a desire to self-improve the paraxial and expand the pedagogical framework that I used at the time. These two studies illustrate how VP research can be inspired by experiential and paraxial questions that arise from personal practice within the field. It shows how reliant VP is upon that personal experience, the textual artifacts that describe it, and the theories that aid in critically reflecting upon it for the findings to inform personal and pedagogical VP practice in general. The research, therefore, comes directly from the practice.

Aligning both the theoretical and practical strands of VP

The functionality of voice and clarity of data and its use within Western VP have a much-needed place within a field that is so symbolically and culturally imbued. There is much terminology that has been used generationally and passed down from master to apprentice that can be ambiguous, if not altogether incorrect (Miller, 1996). O'Bryan & Harrison (2014) wrote that the teacher uses their own experience to demonstrate a hegemonic oral tradition and that the scientific approach to VP arose from the invention of the laryngoscope in 1855.

Scientific methods in VP may enable more academic credibility, but it is often at the expense of practical knowledge. Winter (2023, p. 3) describes the scientific methods as a positivist paradigm used to uncover "scientific truths and accuracies… positivism values an objective, impartial approach, where the researcher is dispassionate and neutral".

Oram (2015) writes that these positivist quantitative frameworks are more established and therefore can create a "struggle to articulate the subject of the voice" (Oram, 2015, p. 16). He writes that, for performing arts departments to receive funding and for staff to advance their careers, they are expected to produce reflective research. He writes that this scientific and theory-based emphasis on research can be problematic in a field that requires students to have practical and learned embodied skills to work in the performing arts.

Even though there is most certainly an important place for positivist and scientific research into the singing voice, Winter (2021) suggests that academic writing does not provide practical solutions, whereas practitioners seek to fill gaps in practitioner experiential knowledge. Their practical experiences within the field of VP can lead to insights that would be otherwise missed by non-practice-informed research. Nelson (2013, p. 3) also writes that research is "driven by a desire to address a problem, find things out, establish new insights". VP is responsible for more than the critical reflection of the field. It is also needed for informing pedagogical practice on a practical and paraxial level to help inform pedagogues on how to better instruct their students in a fundamentally practical field.

Although situated within more established music education and performing arts debates, VP is considered an emergent research field. Winter (2021; 2023) calls the scientific-praxial alignment a 'dilemma'. She writes that research cannot provide all the answers as it is not the only source of evidence on which practical decisions can be made. It is through our practical experiences that we learn how to resolve an otherwise theoretical question. We can intellectually know how something is done, but it is only in the doing of the action that we truly learn how to do it in the first place and therefore how to do it again.

This 'dilemma' and debate may be new to VP research due to its emergent nature, but it is hardly new to the academic field of music education. Elliott (1991) proposes that music is both a verb and a noun. It is both an object and something that we actively participate in subjectively: "Music, at root is what musicians know how to do. On this view, the art of music is both a form of knowledge and a source of knowledge" (Elliott, 1991, p. 23). A performer knows how to do something without needing to describe how they do it. Their knowledge manifests practically, they act intentionally and select an action based upon many possibilities of action.

Similar to Oram (2015) and Nelson (2013), Elliott (1991) writes that musical learning is both procedural knowledge (tacit, embodied know-how) and propositional knowledge (verbalized know-that) which is learned through practice and experience: "Taken as a verb, music in the fundamental sense of musicing or music performance is both a form of knowledge and a source of knowledge" (Elliott, 1991, p. 33). Singing skills can be seen as something that is learned through active engagement within a space and are acquired through the overlaying of verbalized knowledge onto the already held tacit vocal knowledge within the student's body. So too, a voice teacher acquires the VP skills through training and praxis.

Swanwick (1994) also considered the nature of musical knowledge and how it relates to music education. He describes it as multiple strands of knowing entwined within the performer and listener: "Any analytical slice is only part of any cake; it is less than the total" (Swanwick, 1994, p. 13). He describes musical knowledge as Knowing how (materials); Knowing this (expression and form); and Knowing what's what (value). He also describes music as a discourse that can create new ways of knowing and does not only 'reflect' a culture but can also 'refract' it. In this way, VP's practical and theoretical knowledges could be seen to intertwine and enable a more reflective and refractive discourse that can create new modes of meaning and better inform VP knowledge and practice.

Considerations for current research

My currently ongoing research is a qualitative phenomenological study on the opinions and perspectives of female adolescent singing students (12-16 years) on their experiences within their one-to-one private studio singing lessons in which they are taught classical/western-lyrical, contemporary, and/or musical theatre genres in the United Kingdom. It aims to investigate the perspectives of participants engaging (students) or facilitating (teachers) singing lessons, to determine what (if any) meaning or value they may or may not ascribe to the experiences (lessons) inside and outside the lesson space, and to add to current VP knowledge and practice. My questions for this research come from my own paraxial experience as a singing student, a singing teacher, and a VP researcher.

The study is not scientific and positivist, but rather constructivist, relativist, and highly reliant upon the embedded knowledge held within the singing students and the practical pedagogy of their teachers. The practical-theoretical 'dilemma' debate is a consideration in VP research because of its very emergent nature. Therefore, the debate may need to be reflected upon at this stage of emergence to ensure that the VP research field has a credible place within non-performing arts academic institutions as suggested by Nelson (2013), Oram (2015), and Winter (2021; 2023). But is it a 'consideration', a 'dilemma', or a sliding scale with both on either side of a continuum? A Practice-as-Research methodology might find the alignment more of a 'dilemma' (Nelson 2013; Orma 2015; Winter 2021 & 2023). For my current research into female adolescent singers, it lies more towards a 'consideration'. This continuum may not even need to be considered in VP's future as it becomes more established within non-performing arts institutions.

For a VP researcher, phenomenology and its hermeneutical analysis enable the drawing together of both theoretical and practical knowledges. Data is gathered

from participants with subject primacy at its core. Neither the teacher nor the student enters the lesson space from a void. They step into that observable-meta-space already filled with embedded knowledge and expectation. The very act of learning a genre or song has its expectations of sound production and each teacher approaches the lesson space according to their pedagogical background, habitus, and pedagogical ethos. The student already comes into the lesson filled with socio-culturally embedded constructions.

Dibbens (2002) wrote that identity is formed through musical preferences and through beliefs of gender-appropriate musical behaviors that are reinforced by society and culture; Green (1997, p. 2) wrote that women and girls undergo an "active silencing by history, the regulation, the circumscription, the prohibition of women's musical practices"; and Lewis (1993) writes that a history of subordination teaches and reinforces girls and women to be silent and pick their words with care. Female adolescent girls and their teachers are bodies within the lesson space that are engendered and musically, socially, and culturally constructed. The space is also the conduit through which the student is taught a style of singing that is historically and culturally significant. All these elements can affect the participant's interpretation of the phenomenon, the singing lesson experience.

The analysis of my study's data is further reliant upon the researcher's own tacit and academic knowledge: "Knowledge is constructed through dialogue; meaning emerges through a hermeneutic conversation between the text and the inquirer" (Winter, 2023, p. 13). This dialogue is the space in which new knowledge can emerge through an analysis of multiple layers of embedded historic, social, gendered, and cultural discourse that is brought into the lesson and/or experienced within the lesson. It is reflected upon by the student experiencing the singing lesson and further reflected upon by the researcher. Non-peer-reviewed texts and pedagogical practical experience are, therefore, valuable sources of knowing: "pedagogical texts become data and therefore can become part of your data analysis… So, within the phenomenological analysis, the practice writings, videos, and blogs can all be presented as data" (Deborah Winter, email message to author, 24 March 2023).

Conclusion

The very fact that there is tension found between the practical and theoretical texts shows the emergence of the VP research field and the need for these considerations. It appears that most of the tensions are found when traditional academic biases come against the use of practical pedagogical texts as data for analysis. Whereas the performing arts depend upon those very practical knowledge sources that may be dismissed by academia.

It can be seen as a 'dilemma', a 'consideration', or somewhere between the two poles. It may be worth considering that this tension can be aligned by the acknowledgment that any Western VP research originates from and is embedded with embodies historic, cultural, social, and gendered shared meaning. Western VP practice is inseparable from these shared symbolic meanings and, therefore, all VP research is already entwined with that embodied knowledge. If you consider that nothing comes from a void, then all data is text for analysis. Both the teacher and student are fully constructed, functioning, and knowledge-filled when they enter the concrete- and meta-space of the lesson.

These already constructed frameworks influence the events within the lesson: we have the form of the lesson and we have teacher-student's expectations within the lesson. The lesson further adds to the constructions and concept-building within the student who leaves that space with adjustments to their cognitive knowledge. The functional design and the symbolic object learning within the lesson are based upon the learned skills, habitus, and experience of the teacher-whether they critically reflect upon it or not.

These tensions between the practical and theoretical bodies of knowledge may exist within Western VP but acknowledging that the practical is inseparably embedded and embodied in the theoretical may enable one to ease the tensions within their research and see it as less of a 'dilemma' and more as a 'consideration' and a vital part of the data's analysis.

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