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The Slow Singing Approach

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ABSTRACT: For many actors in training, aural and/or video recordings of the original stage productions often serve as the principal source to learn a new song quickly and easily. They do so without having to look at a score, work with a vocal teacher or rehearse with a pianist, which often results in the actor copying the recording. While there are some vocal coaches who advocate that this aural based mimicking is a positive pathway to both learning a song and overcoming any associated vocal challenges, I argue that the vocal muscle-memory it creates dominates so strongly that the actor's imaginative interpretation is impeded. Imitation prevents the actor from being able to experiment creatively with a range of interpretative options; it stops them from connecting with and reacting in the moment to their scene partner, and it does not allow them to characterise with authenticity. Yet, given that so many actors find the reading and writing of music an inaccessible foreign language, how do music theatre teachers follow the advice of experts like Millie Taylor (2008) and enable their students to learn holistically through, with and in their creative, imaginative bodies? Over the past two years, I have been working with acting students, many of whom do not have traditional music literacy, at the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) on what I have come to term the Slow Singing Approach. This embodied focus enables students to take their time to learn a new song, while using their vocal technique effectively, but not at the expense of their authentic acting abilities.

KEYWORDS: Authentic acting, monologuing the music, musical theatre, music theatre, recitativing the song, slow singing

Slow Singing responds to one of the challenges of using aural and/or video recordings of the original stage productions as the principal source to learn a new song quickly and easily. The need for instant gratification and the pursuit of becoming an ideal "product" can cause students to train at an extremely rapid pace at the expense of their longevity (Smith, 2018, p. 47). With pushed deadlines and a demand to learn more repertoire, students often learn pieces without having studied the score, worked with a vocal teacher or even rehearsed with a pianist. These expedited processes often result in the actor copying, or attempting to copy, the recording. Some vocal coaches, such as Guro von Germeten, endorse this song learning approach, arguing that "by repeating the phrase or sound multiple times, a new muscular memory in the vocal apparatus may be created, changing the voice's physiology and 'go-to' vocal behavior" (2021, p. 74). However, I assert that the vocal muscle-memory this process creates may dominate so strongly that the actor's imaginative interpretation is then impeded. Imitation prevents the actor from being able to experiment creatively with a range of interpretative options, just as it stops them from connecting with and reacting in the moment to their scene partner. Because they are mimicking another actor's communicational mechanics and qualities, it is difficult for them to characterise realistically and have an authentic inner life. Yet, given that so many actors find the reading and writing of music an inaccessible foreign language (Bond, 2010; Poirel, 1998; Sondheim, 2011; Stern, 2015), how do music theatre teachers follow the advice of experts like Millie Taylor (2008) and enable their students to learn holistically through, with and in their creative, imaginative bodies? The method I am proposing is therefore the opposite of these common practices. Where currently speed is of the essence, I instead suggest slowness and care. Where imitation is often common, I emphasise playful embodied learning. In what follows below, I outline some of the principles of the Slow Singing Approach.

The Slow Singing Approach requires three factors:

1. Reducing the number of separated acting and singing technical classes.
2. Increasing the number and range of fully embodied activities.
3. Not merely slowing down the process of learning a song but making it extraordinarily slow.

Reducing the Amount of Separated Acting and Singing Technical Classes

Some singing actors, such as Christina Gutekunst, argue that while traditional, isolated vocal training can enable the student to develop a healthy technique and be able to make a beautiful sound, such a voice:

> won't necessarily express an actor's impulses, their thoughts, will and feelings. A focus on the nature of our physical organism or on language and sounds alone can lead to an overly technical approach, and students and actors may well experience here a disconnection between voice work and acting process. (Gutekunst and Gillet, 2014, p. xix)

Australian voice specialist Pat Wilson claims that "performers would derive even more benefit from theatre training, which moves seamlessly among the crafts of acting, singing and speaking, whilst maintaining sensitivity towards the spirit of integrated emotional truth behind it all" (2011, p. 302). Similarly, actor Andrea Moor urges conservatoires to increase the alignment across and integration of acting and vocal classes, arguing that:

> the siloing of vocal training as purely the domain of the voice teacher could be one of the reasons why voice training can impede authenticity in performance. Voice teachers should be better equipped to teach acting in order to link voice to acting and conversely acting teachers should be more aware of vocal pedagogy. (2018, p. 264)

Actors today in music theatre, as in many western theatrical genres, are expected to be "authentic", believable and "truthful" in performance (Moor, 2018, p. 257). It is, of course, impossible for a musical play to be a realistic reflection of life because human beings do not segue from speech into song (and back again) as part of regular conversation (Jones, 2019). Yet music theatre relies on audiences suspending their disbelief to accept that the characters in front of them are "authentic" (Cuny, 2018, pp. 7-8).

While theatrical authenticity can refer to the recreation of historically accurate characters on stage or to characterise similarly to the first actor that played the role (see Barish, 1994), an alternate definition has become popular this century, one that is embraced in this article. Deriving from the ancient Greek definition, authenticity here refers to a "true expression of an individual" that is based on an honest connection between artist and the character they perform (Derbaix & Decrop, 2007, p. 77). Because of the separation of acting and singing classes, however, actors often prioritise making a beautiful sound at the expense of characterising with authenticity, or vice versa. That the industry has to choose regularly between "singers who can't act" or "actors who can't sing" (Dunbar, 2016, p. 71) is no doubt one of the results of this prioritisation process. If the actor's vocal technique is not operating organically, then it is likely to "impair the truthfulness of the moment" (Cuny, 2018, p. 12). Over the last two years, in a combination class, NIDA students worked concurrently on their singing and acting techniques. Because of the slow, multi-disciplined approach, in performance at the end of term, students were not thinking as much about their vocal technique as they had done in similar past situations and were more adept at remaining in the moment of the dramatic action. In discussion afterwards, students shared anecdotally that they were less worried about upcoming high notes or difficult sustained sounds because they had an acting reason to sing in that way. I observed that they seemed more adept than before at being able to live within the given circumstances of a scene, to remain connected to their scene partner and to be more believable even though they were singing. Ideally such integrated acting-singing classes are well-served by having both a singing and an acting teacher present, as both can work with the student to concurrently apply, consolidate and combine the two practices at once. Two teachers can build on or extend an exercise or insight that is offered by the other, they can borrow and rephrase terminology from one another's disciplines, and respond to any contradictions or conflicts that may seem oppositional in the other's practice. However, budget, timetable or other restrictions may prevent two specialists from being able to co-teach in the same session. Fortunately, this does not mean an integrated acting-singing approach needs to be abandoned.

It is important to acknowledge that in no way am I advocating that educators abandon separate discipline-specific technical classes altogether. I am instead suggesting that the

overreliance on predominantly teaching acting and singing in isolation can prevent the actor from connecting to a realistic inner life and performing with authenticity when singing. I have found that by reallocating some of the timetable to integrated skill-based classes and/or by having teachers from different subject disciplines sometimes work together with students in the same workshop studio, actors are better positioned to amalgamate both the technical and creative demands of a song.

At its foundation, embodied learning is a valid cognitive process that "involves a deep connection between perception and action" (Stolz, 2015, p. 476). The student experiences content knowledge, skills and processes not by contemplating them from the outside, but instead kinaesthetically inhabiting them "through the vehicle of one's own body" (Stolz, 2015, p. 476). This type of learning is, of course, not new to conservatoire actor-training, where typically classes in movement, spoken voice and non-sung acting embrace kinaesthetic methodologies, (Hurt, 2014; Kemp, 2012; Lugering & Kavouras, 2013; Munro, 2018). However, often in conservatoires, the practice of learning a new song has students stand or sit statically around a piano. While there are vocal performance experts that advocate for the use of a range of whole body, physiological exercises as part of technique acquisition (Harrison & O'Bryan, 2014, p. 5), for an undergraduate, this curriculum may be relegated to individual singing-focused tuition. As such, they are studied in isolation to the rest of the actor's training. At NIDA, I have found that by decreasing the amount of time learning a song using the traditional approach of standing or sitting around a piano and increasing the amount and range of embodied technical and creative activities with a new song, students have been able to make imaginative acting discoveries while accessing sound vocal technique. This is because they are able to concurrently develop technical skills and physiological processes while exploring instinctive reactions and creative ideas, making their combination a somatically learned experience.

Discipline Specific Teachers

A singing teacher who may not have expertise in acting can always ask some simple acting questions to enable the student to link what/how they are vocalising with why they are doing so. These first layer questions enable the student to acknowledge and investigate the measurable components of the musical text not merely from a singing perspective, but also an acting one. For example, a singing teacher could ask:

- Why is your character needing or wanting to sing so high/low and/or for so long/short at this point?
- What is making them vary (or not) their dynamics, tempo, pitch range, rhythms and/or musical motives across the song?
- Why are they repeating themselves and how is each repeat different as their acting change-journey unfolds across the song?
- How do the variations in their communication style inform their internal emotional arc; in other words, what is driving them to change from *colla voce* in the introduction, to a malleable rhythm in the first verse and then to a strict rhythm in the first chorus?

Then, regardless of the student's answers to these first layer questions, subsequent interpretative second layer questions need to be asked. These should challenge the actor to probe more deeply into what could be behind components of the musical text. This second layer of interpretative questions could, for example, include:

- Is it a choice to communicate in this way or is it subconscious for the character? How can you reflect this with your singing technique usage?
- What is your character trying to do to another character (or to the audience/to a higher being) by communicating (singing) in this way? How can they use their vocalisation choices to reflect the parameters of and changes in their relationship to the other character?
- How will changes in your vocal technique, communication style and musical expressiveness across the song reveal clues about the character's emotional journey and their objectives, obstacles and actions?

By deeply interrogating each moment, the actor is likely to not merely uncover their own unique interpretative insights, but strongly associate the *what* and *how* they are singing to the *why*. They begin to holistically connect the physical-internal, vocal-acting techniques of each musical (measurable) moment together. This results in being more purposeful, as well as more nuanced with each component of the score. It also usually makes the vocally challenging moments

more accessible to them, as they become less concerned about the singing demands for the actor and more focused on the driving needs for the character. Paradoxically, this results in more vocal technique freedom, enabling difficult long notes, large intervals, and demanding *passaggio* negotiations, etc., to be easier for them to sing and of a better quality.

Similarly, an acting teacher who may not have expertise in singing can ask some simple vocal technique questions to prompt the student to connect their characterisation and other acting choices with their vocal use. Once again, this first layer of questions causes the student to actively connect their vocal technique with their acting choices. For example, an acting teacher could ask a student:

- In what way does your physical core need to be engaged and how are you connecting to the ground to support your character's internal life at this point?
- Drawing on the "one breath = one thought" acting principle, how much breath and what type of breath is needed to sustain your chosen thought across that particular musical phrase?
- How much and what type of vowel space or soft palate engagement are you using so you can effectively (or ineffectively) express your emotion and/or communicate your thought?
- How light/full, thin/rich or energised/breathy is your voice within this situation and these particular given circumstances?

Once again, after the student has explored first layer vocal technique questions, the acting teacher can help them to interrogate deeper interpretative aspects by asking second layer questions. The teacher could utilise the same or similar secondary questions to those asked by a singing teacher. What is important is that this level of probing provokes the actor to begin to deeply connect their holistic vocal instrument with their character's acting journey across the scene.

Increasing the Amount and Range of Fully Embodied Activities

While there is a range of Slow Singing embodied activities that I utilise with NIDA actors across their training, such as Monologuing the music (see Stinton, 2018) and Recitativing the text, here I am focusing on Embodying the vowels. Internationally renowned vocal coach Kristin Linklater, who worked with actors to explore the musicality of vowels and their intrinsic kinaesthetic-emotional connection, argues that "awareness of the sensory nature of words must come before that of their informational purpose if we are to restore words to the body" (2006, p. 328). Royal Shakespeare Company vocal coach Michael Corbidge (2016) advocates for the benefits of an actor removing the consonants of a spoken monologue and experimenting aloud with the vowels of the words as a way to reveal and then connect with the emotional nuances of the text and the emotional life of the character. I have applied and then extended this principle to Slow Singing. By working kinaesthetically with only the vowels of the song, I have observed that actors experience five things:

1. The amount of physical exertion required to complete the experiential activities prevents the actor from over-thinking their vocal technique or significantly reduces their tendency to do so, which paradoxically results in them utilising it more effectively.
2. The physiological specificity of deliberately creating each and every exposed vowel not merely in their vocal instrument but with their entire body, results in a highly open and free sound.
3. Because the vigorous physical activities require the student to use much more breath than usual, the student almost cannot help but engage effectively with their breath support system.
4. By removing the consonants, the exposed vowels and their pitch placement reveal insights about the character's emotional life to the actor.
5. By using their whole body in the vowel exploration (see below), the actor is holistically accessing and creating an emotional-physical life connection. This experiential encompassing of embodied inner life then assists them in authentic performance at a later date.

The first phase of Embodying the vowels is the relatively popular practice of lyric monologuing (see Clark, 2002; Craig, 1993; Dunbar, 2016; Henson & Pickering, 2013; Kayes, 2004; Lucca, 2007; McWaters, 2009; Moore & Bergman, 2017; Richardson, 2009). The actor strips away the music and experiments with the lyric text as a verbal (spoken) monologue. Wherever possible, this occurs without exposing

the student to the music of the song, so that they can explore the words and the subtext unimpeded by prescribed rhythm. During this first stage, the actor is guided both experientially and analytically by the teacher to explore the vocabulary choices, the phrasing of the language, the operative (key) words, the use of repetition, punctuation, capitalisation, etc.

Phase two, which ideally occurs across several sessions, centres on stripping back the verbal text further to investigate the vowels, similar to Corbidge's Royal Shakespeare Company exercises. The student progresses sequentially through a series of exploratory activities, retaining and building on each previous step in the consecutive one that follows. Ideally, they experiment with each step multiple times in a variety of different ways. The actor:

1. Removes the consonants and communicates the verbal text in real time, while using only the vowels
2. Then slows their exploration down considerably by elongating the duration of each vowel
3. While vocalising with the vowels, they then use their whole body and the three-dimensional space around them, to physically recreate/respond to/play with each vowel shape
4. If the student has not already started experimenting with pitch variation, the teacher prompts them to do so, while continuing with concurrent whole-body physical play
5. Finally, the student is asked to add the consonants back in and, when they're ready, to move slowly towards a realistic interpretation of the lyric monologue.

Across this second phase, the student and the teacher not only explore the verbal text kinaesthetically, but also through discussion, provocation and debate. The student reflects on the way the body physically connects through the vowels to the emotional arc of the verbal text and the way emotions are created in, released through and/or suppressed by the vowels.

In phase three, ideally again across several sessions, the student is introduced to the song's melody, first without the rhythm. The pitch of every syllable is shared with them one phrase at a time, with the teacher ensuring that each sound has equal duration to the others. For example, all pitches are presented as half notes (minims) regardless of the actual rhythmic text. The student then undertakes an experimentation process similar to phase two, which ends with them learning the song's rhythm. The actor:

1. Removes the consonants and communicates the verbal text using the vowels and given pitches of the song, keeping the duration of the syllables the same
2. Then uses their whole body and the three-dimensional space around them to physically create/respond to/play with the shape of the vowels while they concurrently vocalise each pitch. Students typically physicalise in the spatial plane above their bodies for the high notes and down towards the floor for the low notes
3. If the student has not already started experimenting with oppositional spatial planes, such as above their head for low notes or down near the floor for high notes, the teacher prompts them to do so. Similarly, if they have not yet started to vary the duration of the notes, they are prompted to do so
4. The student is then asked to add the consonants back in and, when they're ready, to slowly move towards their own 'realistic' interpretation (choosing their own rhythm) of the pitched lyric monologue
5. Finally, the teacher offers the rhythm (and pitch) to the student, slowly at first, one phrase at a time. When the student is ready, they are prompted to move towards a 'realistic' interpretation of the song in real time using the accurate pitch and rhythm.

As noted previously, across this phase the teacher and student explore the way the body physically connects through the pitched vowels to the emotional moments/journey, and vice versa. By the time the student adds the consonants back in they are likely to be organically engaging with and effectively utilising their vocal technique without worrying about challenging high or sustained notes. Their breath support, sound quality, freedom of vocalisation, intonation accuracy, etc are usually very sound. Once the rhythm is offered to the student, they have come to know the verbal and pitch texts extraordinarily well because they have spent so much time with the song and usually no memorisation or rote learning is required. In addition, students have creatively played in a variety of different ways with the musical and verbal texts. They will have had to take risks, let go of inhibitions and use their imagination in the playful, physical activities.

This, together with the ongoing discussion, debate and on-the-floor analysis, will almost certainly have enabled them to uncover a range of insights about the character, their situation, the subtext, their scene partner (if there is one) and their world, which helps to create a rich conscious and subconscious inner life. All of this helps them to live authentically in the moment when they eventually perform the song, forgetting about any difficult vocal demands and thus making it more authentic and believable for the audience.

Not Merely Slowing Down the Process of Learning a Song, But Making it Extraordinarily Slow

To fully embody the vowels and learn a song at a pace that is slow enough to allow holistic somatic learning to take place, a shift in mindset is firstly required. The student, as well as the teacher(s), need to embrace the extraordinarily slow pace that the process requires. Given students' need for instant gratification and their (unattainable) pursuit of overnight transformation, many may find Slow Singing excruciatingly and/or unbearably slow. They may not notice obvious or significant progress with their vocal technique, but that doesn't mean that it is not occurring. They therefore need to understand at the outset that this song learning process will take far more time than they are used to, that the approach will impact not only the specific song(s) they're working on using this approach, but that their collective repertoire development will almost certainly be reduced when compared to the volume of material they may have covered in a similar time period in the past. While not absolutely necessary, working with song material that is not known to the student certainly makes their experimentation process easier and so teachers would be well-served to investigate students' prior knowledge. But whether a song is known or unknown to the student, they need to agree at the onset not to seek out song recordings during the learning process. Finally, because the vowel embodiment exercises may be foreign to them or ones they may not be used to doing in a singing class, they may feel uncomfortable or foolish when undertaking them and therefore assume that the process is unhelpful or even 'wrong'. It is imperative that students are open to drawing on their own body and imagination without inhibition or censorship. At the commencement of the approach, it is the teacher's responsibility to effectively frame and prepare students for the new process (including forewarning that activities will be new, embodied and unusual), the unaccustomed learning speed (including that the process pace will be extraordinarily or even excruciatingly slow), and the focused approach application (including that they will largely work with incredibly small components of the song at any point in time). At worst, this enables students' expectations to be managed and at best provides opportunity for students to commit to taking risks and trying things differently.

The vowel embodiment of Slow Singing requires the abandonment of scrambling to learn a song overnight, and instead asks the actor to commit to exploring and experimenting with a single song regularly for at least several weeks, if not longer. As such, it is clearly not an appropriate approach when an actor is facing time scarcity, such as when they need to prepare a new song for an unexpected performance or an audition with a limited turnaround time. However, once students have experienced Slow Singing, developed the discipline required to effectively utilise its components and experienced first-hand the embodied and imaginative benefits that it provides, it becomes one approach of hopefully many alternatives that they can keep in their acting toolbox to utilise in an appropriate context. The actor doesn't need to undertake the entirety of the vowel embodiment approach to reap some of its benefits. For example, should they not have a teacher to introduce and work with them on a song's melodic pitch during phase three, they can easily and independently undertake the lyric monologuing exercises of phase one and the spoken vowel explorations of the second phase. Additionally, when the actor learns a song using a more traditional, faster paced method and is experiencing difficulties with a challenging component of that song, they can choose to employ a specific slow singing activity, such as the whole body pitched vowel experimentation, as a one-off exercise to help overcome the problematic passage. Because the Slow Singing approach, including vowel embodiment, is a vehicle through which actors work holistically to learn a song, it enables them to stop thinking about making sound and instead to merely allow their bodies to make it. Because the actor's body somatically knows how to create safe, accurate, effective sound, the actor is then able to live authentically in the moment of the play, stay focused on their scene partner and, ultimately, be believable for the audience.

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BIOGRAPHY

Nicole Stinton has worked as a director, actor and vocal coach for three decades across the Asia-Pacific, specialising in music theatre. Across her professional career, she has trained conservatoire actors and is currently the Head of Music at the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA). Nicole has also taught and directed at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) and LASALLE College of the Arts

in Singapore. She has conducted masterclasses and conference presentations globally, including in New York, London and across Asia, and has published journal articles and textbooks extensively. A current PhD candidate, Nicole is developing an acting technique for the singing actor that utilises music to holistically inform acting and creative choices.