

The Injustice of Singer/Non-Singer labels by Music Educators

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Cheri, a successful career woman, when speaking of her elementary school encounters with singing describes them as humiliating and dreadful experiences. Sydney, a retired health care professional, has not sung in 65 years based on an incident involving an elementary teacher. Marjorie, an urban planner, described her elementary music teacher as the wicked witch of the west. Maria, a young instrumentalist, has refrained from singing in the last ten years because of a comment made about her singing ability by a secondary teacher. Cheri, Sydney, Marjorie, and Maria now regard themselves, because of these negative encounters in the education system, as adult non-singers. Their teachers, knowingly or unknowingly, used their position of authority to label these three women as non-singers. Labeling, according to current sociologists, is, "... analogous to prejudice, except that it provides us with a focus on language" (Phillips & Johnston, 2007, p. 182). Once labels are placed on students, dichotomy is emphasized instead of inclusion and there is great potential for inaccuracy and ensuing negative effects (McCall & Simmons, 1978). This concept may be summed up in a quote from John Barth's novel, *The End of the Road*, when he writes, "Enough now to say that we are all casting directors a great deal of the time, if not always, and he (sic) is wise who realizes that this role-assigning is at best an arbitrary distortion of the actors' personalities" (Barth, 1958, p. 24). Students, who have been labeled as non-singers in grade school by one whom they deemed as a musical expert, internalize this judgment and allow it to curtail future singing endeavors throughout adolescence and adulthood. Such students in later life may become adult non-singers. Cheri, Sydney, Marjorie and Maria did become adult non-singers and thus the value of fair treatment of individuals and groups that should be inherent in the school system was not upheld in their situations.

Definition of Adult Non-Singer

The adult non-singer is defined as an adult who self-designates as one who does not have the physical capability or coordination to succeed in the simplest of musical tasks. Such tasks would include the matching of a single pitch with another singer or instrument or singing Happy Birthday utilizing the correct intervals. A non-singer is more likely to explain this lack of skill as a genetic aberration rather than as a deficit in his/her educational experience. These musical skills are usually developed in early childhood and, if not developed by the later years of elementary school, will likely remain moribund.

How have individuals in Canadian society come to this conclusion about their own vocal ability? How have they come to fulfill the label of nonmusical? There are adult non-singers in Canadian culture because there has been the assumption that musical ability is an innate attribute that is only present in a minority of societal members. Deeply rooted views, held by a large number of people, state that being able to perform music requires special gifts that are only attainable by or inherited by a chosen few (Hennessey, 2000; Hallam & Prince, 2003). This assumption of innate ability would not be debilitating if inborn musical ability were believed to be inherent in every person. However, innate musical ability is viewed by Western culture as being only evident in a small number of societal members (Hallam & Prince, 2003; Shuter-Dyson, 1999; Seashore, 1938).

Adult non-singers are caught in a society dominated by the view that musical abilities are dependent on innate talent and they have, unfortunately, simply accepted their non-musical status (Ruddock & Leong, 2005). Influential music researchers such as Seashore (1938) and Joyner (1969) were proponents of the idea that certain people did not have an adequate vocal instrument and therefore their vocal skills could never change or develop over time. This assumption has served as a core belief in music research until quite recently. Current researchers are stating that singing ability can be developed throughout one's lifetime and that singing ability is not an innate gift only apparent in a small percentage of people. There has been a shift away from the single entity conception of musical talent to a multi-faceted developmental conception. (Dweck, 1975; Goetze *et al.*, 1990; Hallam, 1998; Hallam & Prince, 2003; Kazez, 1985; O'Neill, 1999;

Relich *et al.*, 1986; Schunk, 1983; Sergent & Thatcher, 1974; Sloboda, 1976; Sloboda, 1990; Topp, 1987; Welch, 1979; Welch, 1985; Welch, 1986; Welch, 1994). Within this circle of current researchers, it is generally reckoned that all humans have the physical capacity and innate musical ability for musical competence. They do not deny that there are differences in ability throughout societal members. According to their studies, the reason for such differences in singing ability in individuals is due to the variety of factors afforded each individual to develop personal musical skills. However convincing these arguments may be, the dominant view in Western society continues to be focused on innate ability.

Common Reasons for self-labeling by adult non-singers

Adult non-singers in Western society continue to uphold the label of being unmusical for three reasons. The first reason is that, in their childhood, adult non-singers compared themselves to siblings or friends who appeared to them as having musical talent (Ruddock & Leong, 2005). These adults do not feel that they were capable of measuring up to these significant people and they came to believe that they did not possess this attribute called musical talent. As a result, a sense of humiliation became connected with vocal production and musical events. In the mind of an adult non-singer, this failure to be able to sing due to a sense of their own lack of ability promoted in them a sense of shame. A vicious circle then ensued. If an adult non-singer fails and perceives ability as the cause, they will continue to expect to fail and will in reality, most likely fail in future musical endeavors (Legette, 1998).

A second reason for adult non-singers to label themselves as unmusical is that in a culture where nonmusical members are accepted and expected, some citizens feel the pressure and judgment of a society that does not allow a spectrum of musical ability. If one does not have a successful performance career in singing, then it is safer to never attempt a vocal sound. (Freer, 2006; Hennessy, 2000; Legette, 1998). Since an adult non-singer's self-perception of their musical ability is one of incompetence, this perception will have a negative effect on future singing and learning behaviors (Bouffard *et al.*, 1998; Monks, 2003; Ree, 1999). If an adult non-singer does try to contribute musically to the society, he/she runs the risk of being ridiculed or criticized

by other societal members. It is easier to judge oneself than to be judged by an entire society as being nonmusical.

Finally, one of the most common reasons for adult non-singers to view themselves as unmusical is adult non-singers received negative feedback when they at some point in their life attempted to sing in a public setting (Knight, 2002; Ruddock & Leong, 2005). A significant number of research studies report that adult non-singers endured a negative childhood experience and this experience has played a crucial role in later life. This negative experience usually involved an authority figure and is remembered as the crux in their singing career (Hennessy, 2000; Knight, 2002; Ruddock & Leong, 2005; Shuter-Dyson, 1999; Topp, 1987). Knight (2002) in her research into the phenomenon of adult non-singers discovered that each person had been silenced as a singer in either a classroom or ensemble experience by a teacher or authority figure. This silencing had been a moment of great humiliation for each individual. Each individual accepted this attribution of being unmusical from the authority figure as a truthful verdict and unquestioningly held onto this viewpoint well in their adult life. According to research performed by Sloboda (1996) only 17% of performance events when his subjects recalled childhood musical involvement were remembered as positive events. Only 27 % of his subjects experienced positive memories of music when music teachers were involved and 85% his subjects experienced negative feelings of embarrassment, humiliation and criticism when asked to recall their performance experience. In research conducted by Hennessy (2000) with pre-service teachers, 9 out of 10 participants described negative experiences of music at the secondary level. These experiences left these particular future teachers with the belief that they were inadequate musicians. These negative experiences involving an authority figure have a long-lasting effect on musical behavior and involvement (Sloboda, 1996). Once adult non-singers have self-judged themselves as unmusical in their youth, this proclamation stays with them throughout adulthood and precludes them from musical activity their entire lives. (Ruddock & Leong, 2005).

Adults who are self-declared non-singers judge themselves harshly and commit with total conviction to their judgment that singing ability is only possessed by a small percentage of individuals. This conclusion is arrived at with little thought given to the

concepts of singing ability as being a) possessed by all or b) a set of skills that can be developed throughout ones lifetime.

Beyond Innate Ability

John Blacking (1973) was one of the first music researchers to challenge ~~the~~ Western culture's concept of singing ability as being possessed by a chosen few. His work with the Venda people in Africa gave Blacking the basis for his assertions. Kingsbury writes of Blacking's work that, "Blacking points out that Western notions of musical talent are diametrically opposed to the Venda idea that all normal human beings are capable of musical performance" (Kingsbury, 1988, p. 61). Blacking's conclusions, even though very respected by ethnomusicologists, did not find widespread appeal throughout the Western world. Current researchers are finding similar reaction to their work. Cross and Morley (2002), in a recent publication, claim that physiological vocal capacities for all human beings go back in time to the fossil record. Human beings have been hardwired to sing since inception into existence. How ever convincing these findings may seem, Western culture continues to believe that there are those who can and those who truly cannot produce vocal utterances.

Numerous recent researchers such as Ruddock & Leong (2005), Shehan Campbell (1998), Welch (1985), and Sloboda (1991), are working diligently to denounce musical skill as an innate talent in a small percentage of societal members. These leading researchers have put forth the idea that musical skill progresses through normal cognitive development in a musical environment. It is beginning to surface that the ability to sing has much more to do with cultural and environmental factors than it does with innate or inherited abilities. The ability to sing can be developed and encouraged throughout one's lifetime. It is a skill that is susceptible to alteration through learning and is deeply influenced by environmental surroundings such as family encouragement, school support, peer support, societal support and musical opportunities (Sloboda, 1990).

This concept of encouragement, support and development that is prevalent in current music education literature was and is, unfortunately, not being upheld amongst a small number of elementary and secondary educators in Canadian schools. Some educators are responsible for creating this phenomenon of adult non-singers. Teachers

are using their position of authority to label students as singer and non-singers. These teachers may not even be aware that they are labeling students in this manner but it is indeed happening. This complex problem of dichotomizing a population into categories extends from the school system and penetrates Canadian society. It not only affects the student during their schooling career but throughout their entire lives.

The stories of adult non-singers

For my present doctoral research I collected data from twelve self-identified adult non-singers. They have not sung in any great capacity since childhood or adolescence and they do not perceive themselves as singers. The twelve individuals, to be a part of this study, were first screened to discern validity for participation. Criteria to be part of the study was to live in the vicinity of where the research was being conducted, be 18 years or older, be educated in a Canadian school system for his/her entire schooling career, and speak English as his/her first language. Participants, once established as meeting the criteria for involvement in the study, were further screened based on answers to questions about childhood singing experiences and how he/she felt perceived self as singer. Participants were introduced to the background for the research through a one hour group lecture. After the background information was presented, each participant proceeded through seven - 40 minute private sessions on a weekly basis with the researcher. These private sessions introduced vocal production, vocal physiology, and vocal repertoire to the adult non-singers. All sessions were videotaped. The researcher's summary of each session was sent to the participant for analysis and reflection. Questions about the individual's perception of self as singer were discussed at the culmination with further reflections being emailed directly to the researcher. The participant's stories were looked at through narrative inquiry methodology in which lived experiences generate new relations and are honoured as a source of knowledge. It was through the individual story that the researcher gained insight into the lived experience of the participant which had created in him/her the perception of self as non-singer. Questions of meaning, social relevance and intention were asked when drawing out themes common to the participant's stories (Clandinin, 2007; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). For the purposes of this article, the stories of four participants will be told to illustrate the idea that educators

are not upholding the value of fair treatment of individuals and groups and are thus perpetuating inequities through the education system.

Cheri

The first self-identified adult non-singer is Cheri. Cheri is in her mid 40's and is a medical doctor. She has a family, house, dog and cat. She has a very fulfilled life but felt something was missing because she was drawn to be a part of this research on adult non-singers. She asserts that the reason she does not sing as an adult goes back to a school experience with an elementary music teacher. In January of Cheri's grade four year, the music teacher put forth the opportunity to be a part of a recess choir that would travel in the spring to the nearest city for a concert. Cheri was excited at the prospect of being part of the choir, traveling to the city, and missing out on having to go outside for recess in the middle of a Canadian winter. She eagerly went to the audition with all the other grade four girls. When the list was posted for who was to be in this special choir, Cheri soon realized that not only was she not selected to be a part of the choir but she was the only grade four girl not to have been selected. She was completely ostracized from the rest of her female peers. There was no one with whom to play and in her own words, "It was humiliating. You really have an awareness of acceptance or rejection at that age. It was absolutely devastating." She had never thought that she could not sing until this incident. She had always participated enthusiastically and without reserve in singing activities. Cheri remembers that particular winter as very long and lonely. Her parents phoned the school to see if she could be involved in this musical experience in some capacity but the music teacher refused, stating restriction in numbers as the basis. Looking back on this situation, Cheri concurs that on multiple levels, it was an abuse of authority. "To do that to a child, to reject her and then basically sentence her to loneliness for months was a travesty," in Cheri's eyes.

In junior high, there were musical events and opportunities in which to partake but Cheri, because of that event in grade four, did not have the confidence to try out for a role. She chose not to take part in choir or instrumental music in secondary school. She chose not to make it her interest. Her desire was to be involved in the musical productions and opportunities but she feared being again rejected. "That fear of rejection.

It was absolutely humiliating.” She perceives the incident with the grade four choir teacher as a pre-eminent moment in her singing career that adversely affected her attitude and participation in musical endeavors throughout adolescence and adulthood.

Sydney

The second participant in the research is Sydney. Sydney is a retired head nurse who worked successfully for many years under the local health region. She came from a very musical home where musical participation was encouraged. Piano lessons were part of her childhood and she completed her Grade Eight Royal Conservatory piano exam. Sydney’s reasoning for being an adult non-singer goes back to an experience with a teacher in grade two. She recalls one particular day, she was singing her little heart out when the teacher said to her, “Would you mind just mouthing the words?” Even though she also cites her perfectionist personality and a shy tendency as possible factors to her non-singing situation as an adult, in the interview, she kept returning to this incident with the teacher in grade two as a crux event in her self-perception as a singer. After this event, she would not join group singing at a social event or church. She made the assumption at the age of seven, based on the statement from an authority figure, that she could not sing and has not sung in any great capacity for 65 years.

Marjorie

A third self-designated adult non-singer participant is named Marjorie. She grew up in a small town on the Canadian Prairies and spent her entire schooling career in this location. She recently retired from an administrative role as an urban planner with a major Canadian city. Marjorie grew up in a musical home and was envious of her brothers who engaged in singing endeavors effortlessly and regularly. The first question asked of her in an email interview was if she had any memories of musical experiences in her schooling career. She wrote, “The itinerant elementary school music teacher came once per week. She was like the wicked witch of the west. She had a scolding and authoritative manner. She would bang rhythms out with a ruler on the desk and make us try to guess the song and was quite disparaging if we didn’t guess it. She criticized us if we didn’t get the tunes or the words right quickly. She centered children out who made

mistakes. She also threatened to leave the stage at a school concert if we didn't sing better. She seemed a very impatient and authoritative person. Music class was NOT fun at all and it wasn't a happy thing." Marjorie was an introverted individual and felt that to truly have had an enjoyable musical experience as a child, she needed to have been seen and engaged as an individual. To simply ask Marjorie to sing a solo in a classroom situation was not conducive to her personality. This disregard for individual personality, in Marjorie's case, caused her to refrain from singing for fear she would be forced into a situation in which she was not comfortable. Marjorie claimed, "I always felt that I should and I was meant to sing but I never could or did." Marjorie, being a highly sensitive person, felt that any message in public about singing ability was a message to her. If a teacher said the class was not singing properly, Marjorie took that statement to mean she was not singing properly. She claimed, "I was never stand alone singled out but in my mind I was." She took upon herself all blanket statements that were made by teachers who were not taking into account the variety of personalities in the classroom.

This led to the query of how she felt about singing as an adult. She expressed that she has no confidence in her singing ability as an adult because of her earlier childhood experiences. If she is at a party and Happy Birthday is sung, she sings quietly or mostly mouths the words so as not to draw attention to herself. She stated that if she were asked to sing Happy Birthday as a solo, she would deflect the request by joking that her gift would be to not sing.

Maria

The final adult non-singing participant is Maria. Maria is in her mid-20's and is currently a master's instrumental performance major at a Canadian university. She has won concerto competitions and participates in wind ensemble, new music ensembles and orchestra. She is a well-respected instrumentalist in the music department but has not sung since junior high. Her singing story ends when she heard about a comment made by a teacher regarding her singing ability. While participating in her junior high choir at a school assembly, a science teacher heard her sing. That day after school, a friend's sister said to Maria, "Mr. Kelp told our class that you couldn't sing." This statement made Maria very uncomfortable. Upon arriving home that evening, she taped herself to

ascertain if this statement were indeed true. When no clear result was ascertained she made the assumption, based on this second hand information, that she could not sing. After this incident, she refused to engage in choral activities. Maria quit her junior high choir and never sang again. She surmised that, “What I was perceiving as fun and good was being perceived elsewhere as just awful. It was a really big shock to me.” She sees this experience as the root of why she has not sung in the last ten years. “I don’t sing because of that experience.”

Maria will not sing Happy Birthday at a social event nor will she sing in church. When asked if she is resentful, regretful or sad that she has not sung over the past decade, her response was, “Yah – sad, regretful and resentful! I wish that that day in junior high hadn’t happened. It was so much fun – I enjoyed singing with my friends, at parties, in church. I don’t think I would have become a professional singer but I think I would have gotten a lot of joy out of it.”

Maria was asked to ponder whether the science teacher could have been wrong in his assessment. Her response was, “No, I’m sure he wouldn’t have said anything just for kidding or to be rude. I think that if he said something it was because it troubled him or it was really obvious. Maybe he was wrong in telling the class but not in the assessment.” She concluded with the declaration, “When it comes from a person in authority, how can you not believe that?” A follow-up question focusing on the science teacher’s assessment was asked of Maria. This question centered on what her perception of herself as a singer would be if she found out that her friend’s sister had misunderstood the science teacher. How would her perception of herself as a singer change if she found out that the comment made about her singing ability was not meant to have been directed at her? Maria wrote in an email response, “I have thought a lot about your question, and the truth is that every time I come to it, I'd rather not think about it. I think that if I had misunderstood my friend's sister or she had misunderstood her teacher, it would be so unfortunate to have gone all this time with my mouth shut up and being all shy about singing.” However, she absolutely convinced herself that she could not sing based on the teacher’s second hand comment and she has not, until recently, ever questioned that declaration.

Themes based on adult non-singer's stories

Through the lens of narrative methodology, four reoccurring themes emerged out of the narratives. The first theme is all four of these adults state that their childhood experiences of singing adversely affected their participation in singing as an adult as well as their concept of self as singer for years and sometimes decades. Their experiences and their self-concept are directly linked together and all of them either described a pre-eminent moment or an influential person who negatively affected their involvement with singing.

The second theme is there was a strong emotional connection between childhood singing experiences and how they perceived themselves as singers later in life. The participants described their emotional involvement with singing as being uncomfortable or feeling humiliated. The participants reacted strongly to these experiences and to them asserted negative emotional descriptors.

The third theme is the participants have internalized the negative emotional outcome of these childhood experiences and this has created their perception of themselves as singers. This can be seen, for example, in Cheri's complete shut down of singing participation based on feelings of rejection after her grade four experience and her complete resolve that she is not singer.

Finally, one of the main themes is there was a complete belief in the authority figure's proclamation. It did not matter if the authority figure was a music teacher or just the voice of a teacher through a friend; each participant committed to what the authority figure said about their singing ability.

Social Injustice Themes based on Adult Non-Singers' Stories

Each of these four individuals has experienced a different level of social injustice while being educated in a Canadian school. Collectively, they were mistreated because they were labeled as non-singers. This labeling may have occurred because of the teacher's concept, which is ultimately based on the societal concept, that musical skill is based largely on innate ability. When that innate ability was not immediately apparent, each of the participants was regarded as having little musical talent when in most likelihood all of them possessed the ability to develop satisfactory singing skills.

By focusing on innate ability, a small number of educators are judging the individual student based on a given inborn attribute in which the student has no control. Placing inborn qualities such as innate musical ability at the forefront is equivalent to labeling an individual's musical ability based on color of skin, sex or birthplace. An assumption of this magnitude creates a fatalistic attitude towards vocal participation because involvement in vocal endeavors becomes totally reliant on heredity and genetics. Singing ability is seen as a lifelong trait that is fixed and uncontrollable (Austin and Vispoel, 1998; Ruddock & Leong, 2005).

Secondly, labeling a child as a non-singer stigmatizes them for a lifetime. Comments made to a child about singing ability, no matter how insignificant they may seem to adults, affect future musical interests and endeavors. Since the child's self-perception of musical ability is one of incompetence, this perception will have a negative effect on future singing and learning behaviors because there is a direct link between self concept and sense of self (Bouffard et al., 1998; Monks, 2003; Ree, 1999). The mandate of educators is to strengthen individuals to become fully functioning citizens but when select teachers label, restrictions and boundaries are erected on the student. Finally, the concept of exclusion within the music education curricula needs to be addressed. The best getting better with the rest falling by the wayside is prevalent in Western culture and since the education system is a reflection of the society at large, this attitude is common in institutions and curricula. There needs to be an acceptance of the theory of a musical spectrum. If one aspires to the concept of musical skill as a developmental process, then one must permit and accept individuals at different musical stages. Welch (1986) states that different types of singers need to be allowed and encouraged to be at different points along a developmental continuum of singing ability. In his work with children he found that "... a child who shows evidence of being at one of the less skilled stages should be regarded as a client for development, rather than necessarily revealing an irretrievable lack of ability in music" (Welch, 1986, p. 300). There needs to be a sense of inclusion of all levels of singers in music education rather than exclusion of all but the elite musicians. The concept that there must be people at the bottom of the ladder needs to be replaced by the idea that the ladder should serve as a means for all to climb to the top.

When music education is focused on innate ability and not the development of every child, students are labeled as non-singers and are thus not only affected throughout their schooling careers but into their adult life as well. They remain with the social stigma of being a non-singer, a non-musical participant, and this becomes internalized and a part of their persona. Music education needs to look critically at its curricula and current practices of interaction between students and teachers to ensure that the stories that are told by Cheri, Sydney, Marjorie and Maria do not repeat themselves in the future.

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