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Music Theater Singing…Let's Talk. Part 1: On the Relationship of Speech and Singing

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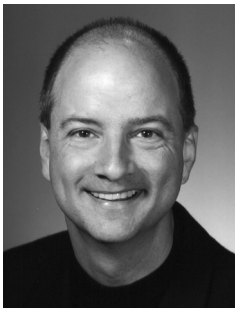

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INTRODUCTION

"*Si canta come si parla*" (one sings as one speaks); "*Chi pronuncia bene, canta bene*" (who enunciates well, sings well).

These adages have long been a part of the useful reservoir of pedagogical language. They embody the conviction that the mechanism of singing is not separate from the mechanism of speech.[1]

There long has been a pervasive understanding that speech and singing are closely related, and nowhere has this been more germane, perhaps, than in the various uses of the voice associated with American music theater. The contemporary music theater singing voice has speech as its foundation and is generally understood to be "an extension of speech, alike not only in its mechanism of production, but also in its inner connection to the emotion and thought that motivate speech in daily life."[2]

This article brings together writings from the pedagogic literature that explore the origins of speech as the basis for music theater singing, insights into the relationship of speech and singing, and thoughts on how singing is affected by the clarity and level of speech. While somewhat unconventional in format, this article—a compilation of primary sources with commentary—aims to provide the reader with a more specific understanding of the fascinating dynamic of speech and singing, and prompt additional forays into research.

ORIGINS

Finding the ideal balance of speech and singing for the stage seems to have been an ongoing process since the dawn of performance itself.

To form some idea of the antiquity of the Divine Art of Singing, one must go back to the time of the ancient Greeks, who were famed for their culture and love of the beautiful. As far as can be ascertained, there is little definite evidence that they excelled greatly in the art of the cultivation of the singing voice; indeed, most of the records go to prove rather the very great importance that they attached to the training of the vocal organs purely for oratorical purposes. This branch they regarded as of the greatest possible importance, and took the most infinite pains to secure that the voice should be developed,

for public speaking, to its utmost capacity. Even their most famous athletes scarcely received a more rigorous preparation for their arduous work than their future orators.[3]

Furthermore,

their orators seem to have intoned their speeches, the declamatory style, of which they made use, being expressly termed *cantus obscurior*. As they often spoke to immense audiences, and almost always in the open air, this mode of delivery may probably have been adopted in order to make their voices carry farther.[4]

These vocal Olympics illustrate many of the more contemporary points we find regarding the relationship between singing and speech, such as the Arthur Lessac "Call," *si canta come si parla*, speech-level singing, and the like, and help to launch our understanding of developments in the field. Retracing the steps to the intoned, declamatory style of their Greek forefathers, the Florentine Camerata set out to find a new style of vocal music performance in which text was most important and the voice was at the service of the text. To this end, composers wrote for singers in a predominately midvoice range, in a style that was not virtuosic for its own sake, but that was suspended in a homogenized blend somewhere between recitative and aria, in "a sort of half-way house between the sister arts of singing and speaking."[5] Little seems to have changed from the end of the sixteenth century in this regard. Rather,

since the days of the Florentine Camerata, composers and producers of music drama have taken sides in the continuing controversy over the relative importance of words and music . . . American musical theater is a result of a historical swing toward the importance of text in music drama, and the rejection of classical singing in favor of vernacular, word-dominated singing styles is another aspect of the same struggle.[6]

Insights

Though formal research into the music theater singing voice is still developing, classical voice pedagogy, with its long and distinguished history, helps us better to understand the functional relationship of speech and singing by illuminating this intersection of voice usage. Prominent pedagogues mention the speech/singing phenomenon in passing, spin illustrative analogies, and, at times, provide lingering glimpses into the very specific junction of these voice modes.

There are many aspects about the singing voice that are related to the speaking voice.[7]

The basic mechanism for speaking and singing is the same, and the physical processes involved are essentially the same. Speaking and singing share the same breathing apparatus, the same larynx, the same resonators, and the same articulators . . . Persons who are skilled at both speaking and singing can pass from one to the other with apparent ease; this is a necessary skill in opera and musical comedy, where the medium shifts back and forth between singing and spoken dialogue with little or no pause.[8]

We must regard singing as the art of combining tune and speech.[9]

To sacrifice the normal speaking resonance in search of some hypothetically perfect singing resonance which produces tone as opposed to speech instead of in conjunction with speech is perhaps one of the most self-contradictory practices, for every student tries to be expressive without realizing that much of his practicing may be directed at incapacitating his most valuable tool of expression, his normal speech.[10]

[M]any aspects of singing impinge in some degree upon the speech function.[11]

One of the most important connections a singer needs to make is with his or her speaking voice.[12]

The "if-speech-be-the-food-of-singing" comparisons play on, and are as plentiful as they are poetic. "Speaking and singing are just a different degree of the same kind of behavior" is a typical refrain.[13] Singing is spoken of as:

sustained speaking[14]
an extension of speech[15]
a sustained form of speech[16]
a heightened form of speaking[17]
a heightened extension of efficient speech[18]
intensified speech[19]
an extension and elevation of speaking[20]
speech at a high emotional level[21]
a form of musicalized speech[22]

As for this musical nature of speech, one is asked to consider "the melodies we use when speaking." And when comparing "the melody of speech and the melody of song," the specific difference between these modes is said to be found in "the sustaining of particular notes on given

syllables of words."[23] Indeed, we learn that "any spontaneous vocal utterance can be extended into music,"[24] and that the spoken voice is "the true voice of the singer."[25]

As a practical aside, it has been the experience of this author that using the music of speech can be an effective way for music theater students to find more speech quality in their singing, and is progressive in bridging the transition from monologue to song. After learning the text as a monologue, the student works with the rhythms and pitches provided by the composer. Rather than being an obstacle to effective communication, these line readings can become a vehicle for further illuminating the text. Speaking a communicative monologue in the rhythm of the composer is the important first step, followed by modulating the speech to the *contour* of the melodic line. While working with this contour the student is learning the physical energy required for speaking at various *levels* up and down the scale, is embracing the energy required to sing it, and is also one small step away from letting the voice focus on specific pitches. These voice levels often constitute an important discovery in technical development, can be integral in securing the monologue in the song, and will be discussed later in more detail.

Of course cautionary caveats temper the debate: "'Sing as you speak' is a phrase to be reserved for the very fortunate few whose voices seem to be 'naturally' free . . ."[26] Some go a step further by stating that "singing is *not* simply sustained speech spun out over wide-ranging pitch fluctuations, except in the most simplistic and technically limited vocal styles," and that "many problems singers encounter stem from a false conception that singing is nothing more than an extension of speech, and requires only the same degree of energy as speech." It is argued that "the requirements for singing far exceed the demands of speech."[27]

While it is agreed that this may be the case for singing in the *bel canto* tradition, it is important to bear in mind the differences one finds in music theater singing.

> The preeminence of words over music in American musical theater, a result of a historical swing towards the importance of text in music drama, has also influenced the development of its singing styles in the areas of range, tone quality, and diction. One result of this art form's stress on words is the Broadway composer's practice of writing most songs in the singer's speaking range, where the words are most likely to be heard.[28]

The research goes on to find that "characteristics of operatic style emerge as distinctly different from Broadway style, the latter being more similar to speaking," and that "the voice source characteristics found in the Broadway style were somewhat similar to those found in loud speech."[29] Another states that:

> The musical theatre singing voice is an acoustical and emotional extension of the speaking voice and, while something similar might be said of the operatic singing voice, I would argue that opera seeks to transcend speaking. But musical theatre is a vernacular forum and owes its credibility to its ability to touch the prosaic. So it is important that its singing voice, rather than transcend the spoken, amplify and extend it without distorting or transfiguring it. The musical theatre song's classical first cousin is the soliloquy not the aria."[30]

ON THE CLARITY OF SPEECH

In his book dealing with speech-level singing, Seth Riggs states that "singing is nothing more than sustained speech over a greater pitch and dynamic range . . . [and] assuming that your speaking voice is clear and unforced, your singing voice should be based on the quality of that speaking voice."[31] The presupposition that the speech upon which we base our singing is to be clear and unforced is articulated by authors again and again as an important touchstone.

> The speaking voice acts as the substantial factor of the singing voice and constitutes its real support . . . hence no correct singing can exist without a correctly produced speaking voice.[32]

> Determine that the speech pattern is healthy, since it will be transferred to singing that emanates out of the speaking range.[33]

> Because the nature of belting appears to be based out of speech, and speech-like inflections, the voice teacher and voice pathologist must ensure that his/her singers are employing optimal use of the speaking voice . . . [34]

> The close relationship between speech and belting and other forms of commercial singing underscores the importance of healthy speech patterns as a point to departure . . . [35]

ON THE LEVELS OF SPEECH

If the idea that music theater singing is based on, or grows out of, a healthy speaking voice, then how does this speech coincide with the various types of singing associated with

this style (legit, speech-mix, belt, etc.)? Might one need to identify varying levels of speech to correspond to varying levels of singing? And, if so, what are these speech-levels? The literature provides some answers.

> [T]here's a conversational area, where you would speak if you were sitting next to a friend; an elevated area, where you might speak to a friend across the room; and a declamatory area, where you might speak to a room full of people. The latter sound you produced is very much like singing, the difference being that singing requires sustaining each sound on a designated pitch.[36]

> The historic Italian tradition of voice training has produced a familiar adage, *si canta come si parla* ("one sings as one speaks"), which is based on the assumption that one speaks *efficiently*, as when using energized stage delivery.[37]

> Singing simple folk and popular songs can be compared to ordinary conversation, but full-voiced singing in opera and oratorio is more comparable to dramatic acting, preaching, or passionate public speaking.[38]

> In everyday speaking, we use a variety of pitch levels, from low to high.[39]

> The pitch and the dimensions of the singing voice—the volume, the quality, and loudness—are determined by the speaking voice. Speaking high or low, resonant, loud or soft, in any gradation of sentiment and shade of color, lays the ground for singing in high or low pitch, loud, resonant or soft, in any musical color and expression.[40]

> As actors . . . we must learn to speak and move in a variety of ways different from our everyday demeanor. Using our ordinary speaking voice when performing Shakespeare, for example, is generally unacceptable—we must expand our vocal size to match the parlance of his style . . . Singing requires us to do the same: we must be willing to expand and transform the voice . . .[41]

> However, there can be an element of useful truth, after all, in that carelessly overused phrase, if the teacher goes on to illustrate that speech approaches singing as the emotional content increases and intensifies. A teacher can certainly say that students will notice that singing, when it is "right," feels very much like vehement speech, that their bodies, while singing properly, might recognize the feel of "emergency level speech."[42]

> In animated speech, the speaker with a well-focused voice often falls quite naturally into the use of the Call . . .[43]

Pursuant to the last citation, Lessac goes on to amplify his understanding of this particular voice level.

TABLE 1.

Speech Levels	Singing Levels
1. [whisper] [intimate conversation]	1. [crooning] (not viable for the theater)
2. conversational area ordinary conversation	2. [light speech-mix]
3. declamatory area energized stage delivery	3. [mix] [light belt]
4. vehement speech emergency level speech Call	4. [belt]

> The Call is the bridge in tonal production between the conversational speaking voice and the singing voice . . .
> . . .
> The Call . . . is designed to expand and develop range, pitch, volume, production, and quality of practically the entire speaking voice, most of the female singing voice, and approximately two-thirds of the male singing voice.
> . . .
> The Call . . . expands the technical and emotional range of the voice . . .
> . . .
> The Call is precisely that—a calling out—but it is a rounded, *robust* Call, a *ringing* Call, a *rich* Call, a *singing* Call; a *freely liberated* Call; it is a Call that always reveals involved, connected behavior.[44]

By taking the various speech levels outlined above and arranging them on a continuum from light to heavy, it is possible to see how these speech levels might correspond to various degrees of speech-level singing (Table 1). Some of this, of course, is related to dynamics (*forte* is louder than *piano*, a Call is louder than a whisper, belt is louder than mix), some of it is related to pitch (as one increases the level of speech, the fundamental frequency also tends to rise), but all of it is related to emotional intensity and to the dramatic need of the situation. Music theater singing, after all, denotes a style of performance that is first and foremost live theater, and while there may be amplification, the authentic emotional life of the character must still be communicated and projected. It is very telling, however, that on this continuum there is a corresponding raising of pitch/intensity when emotion/energy go up—that each increase in speech intensity typically finds a corresponding increase in fun-

damental pitch. And just as one tends not to Call in the low range of speech (it utilizes a higher pitch level and instinctively makes greater use of a more engaged support mechanism), one also doesn't belt near the bottom of the scale (there seems to be consensus that belt occurs above the *primo passaggio*). Furthermore, just as the use of the Call would not be effective for an entire monologue or scene, one also would not want to belt a whole song or an entire role. The key plateaus of emotion, coinciding with musical peaks, dictate the use of these more animated voice modes. The belt and/or Call simply grow out of these needs.

Throughout the literature one finds that it is precisely these extremes of voice levels that provide the most fodder for debate. The more energized extreme culminating in the belt, however, is of key interest and will be examined in depth in the subsequent article: "Music Theater Singing . . . Let's Talk. Part 2: Examining the Debate on Belting."

CONCLUSIONS

There is pervasive agreement that speech and singing do have much in common. The vocalism needs to be on a fully flexible continuum, throughout range and levels, and the speaking and singing need to live side by side on this continuum. Authors agree that "there are distinct advantages in using one basic technique for speaking and singing,"[45] and that "the singing and speaking tones are identical, produced by the same organs in the same way, and developed by the same training."[46] A well modulated speaking voice, however, doesn't adhere to prerequisites of classical singing quality. In speech the larynx is free to move and respond flexibly to the intention and the emotion. Because modern music theater grows out of the dramatic situation in a vernacular fashion, and "musical theater performers set out to sing in natural voices in the speech patterns and inflections of the characters they are portraying,"[47] the voice is called on to respond more in these speech-like ways.

With the very best of these performers, the transitions are so smooth that those places where speech stops and singing begins are practically imperceptible. However, no matter how well-trained a voice may be, in musical theater the voice is subservient to the text, and therefore must not become monochromatic or beautiful for its own sake. The singer must be able to produce a variety of tone qualities and sing in a variety of vocal modes to reflect and express the lyrics, the character, the emotions of the piece.[48]

So, if the singing is to have something to say, it requires this flexible approach. And just as various speech levels are available to us, these levels can be translated directly to the singing to support and coincide with the textual and dramatic needs of the moment. In this material it's not an either/or—it's a "Y'all come."

To this end, aspiring music theater performers are encouraged to "find a good voice teacher, one who is sympathetic to building a healthy, robust singing voice that is an extension of the actor's speaking voice."[49] With speech being the currency in music theater, it is incumbent upon those of us who work with performers and future teachers in this field to embrace more fully this understanding. Indeed "speaking and singing have common denominators and finding out what they are and making them our own requires research, study, and a genuine openness to rethinking what we *know*."[50] Let us keep our minds and ears open to this developing knowledge and encourage further exploration into this fascinating crossover of voice usage.

NOTES

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Norman Spivey earned the BM degree from Southeastern Louisiana University, the MM from the University of North Texas, and the DMA degree from the University of Michigan. He traveled to Paris on a Fulbright grant and was later awarded the Harriet Hale Wolley award as artist-in-residence at the Fondation des États-Unis. Spivey toured France and Canada as Papageno in *Die Zauberflöte* in addition to singing with l'Opéra de Lille, l'Opéra de Nantes, and l'Opéra de Nancy.

Remaining active in concert and oratorio work, he has sung Schubert's *Winterreise* in Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall and gave the American premiere of Poulenc's rediscovered *Quatre Poèmes de Max Jacob*. Fellowships have included the Aspen Music Festival, the Institute for Advanced Vocal Studies in Paris, and The Voice Foundation's Van L. Lawrence Fellowship for his study of music theater singing and its pedagogy. Other

support for this study came from the Institute for the Arts and Humanities at Penn State, where he was a recent resident scholar/artist. An active member of NATS, Spivey participated in the NATS Intern Program and later hosted this program at Penn State. He has served as president of the Allegheny Mountain Chapter of NATS, governor of the Pennsylvania District, national vice president for NATS Workshops, and currently serves on the board of The NATS Foundation in addition to being the Eastern Region governor-elect.

As associate professor of music at Penn State, he teaches singing and courses in voice pedagogy, and serves as coordinator of the voice area. With Penn State music theater voice colleagues Mary Saunders, Raymond Sage, and Bev Patton, he is a faculty member of the ongoing summer clinic, Bel Canto / Can Belto: Learning to teach and sing for musical theatre.

> *Good breath management and the ability to sustain and to move the voice, to play with resonance balances, and to produce understandable diction are essential elements of every vocal idiom.*
>
> Richard Miller, "The Broadway Sound," in *Solutions for Singers*, 246.

PUBLICATION DEADLINES

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