EVTA Susan Yarnall report from Helsinki presentation

Metaphors and Vocal Identity

Metaphors

We use metaphors all the time, they help to make sense of our world and when it comes to something as wonderful and intangible as our singing voice we do it even more. But we are all multi talented and just like the man I watched on his mobile phone on the beach, we talk, we walk, we wave our arms, we listen ...as we try to communicate! For a hundred years now we have been able to look down, thanks to Garcia, and see one dimension of the singing voice in action and for the last twenty years we have had an explosion of technology that helps to give us other dimensions to explain how we sing.

God gave us ears, of course, but I wonder are we really using them effectively and have our students lost some auditory skills with the increase of sound that dominates our culture nowadays. I do believe that while the programmes we are exploring are visual 'metaphors' as Graham Welch (2005) describes them, we can and should link them to the auditory and kinaesthetic skills we need as singers.

Metaphors give us imaginative concepts which help to form our vocal identity – who we are as singers? My own research into vocal identity and the perception of the singing voice highlighted the way professional singers used metaphors that had elements of movement and space, and these programmes we are exploring enhance these important sensations for beginner singers, adults and children, choral singers, and our students.

Ingo Titze (1994) summarised the kind of descriptions we use for the singing voice into 5 categories:

- Effort
- Comfort
- Energy
- Colour
- Sensory

The first three are really the technical kind of metaphors

- Effort
    - Powerful
    - Strained
- Comfort
    - Easy

    - Pressed
- Energy
    - Weak
    - Dynamic

We can use Real Time Visual Feedback (RTVF) to highlight these characteristics. They illustrate the physicality of singing. When we achieve optimum effort, comfort and energy we can say we are a singer, but is there something else...

Sensory and colour metaphors are more psychological by nature but equally important in forming the unique sound of our voice:

- Colour
    - Bright
    - Dull
- Sensory
    - Warm
    - Cold

We can use RTVF to identify these characteristics but it is more problematic because vowel colour and articulation are also involved. However we have been given a tool to 'play' with and there are new advances all the time...just remember it is not as good as our ears.

Vocal identity

The singing voice is stable from 25-45 years approximately, though it can change with medical treatment, trauma, pollution and substance abuse. Young singers going through puberty and older singers going through the later hormone imbalances experience more vocal changes with physical and psychological implications. Here are 5 models of vocal identity that I have found amongst the singers I teach:

1. Insular
    a. Inward looking
    b. Internal listening despite the mismatch
2. Cloned
    a. I wanna be like you, or him or her (the X factor)
    b. Mimic (technically clever)
3. Reflective
    a. Accepts teacher/parent/peer judgements
4. Performer
    a. Establishes fach/career choice
    b. Learns from performance experience/fellow singers
5. Explorer

a. Open/enquiring/creative

Of course every singer is individual but it sometimes helpful to look at the psychological aspects of the singing voice to keep the 'whole' person in mind.

Sensitivity and science

When using the RTVF we need to be sensitive to our students, especially the psychological implications it might have. We need to be aware of the learning styles of our students.

Pitfalls:

1. Technology has limitations – it is only a tool not a magic wand!
2. Vocal identity is more than a spectrogram – singers are more than a feedback.
3. With the limited resources of laptop soundcards and microphones we must not expect too much, hence the value of voice labs in universities and conservatoires
4. Don't mix metaphors and confuse anatomy and acoustics.
5. Stick to specifics like a series of vowels, staccato octaves etc. but also use phrases from songs...music is our objective.
6. Take care ...check distance from microphones etc. but watch you don't modify your voice to the small screen, really sing as if you had an audience, otherwise you are not really examining the 'truth' of your voice.

Twelve practical ways of using spectrographic analysis

I demonstrated in a practical class in Helsinki how I used *Sing and See* with my young beginner singers. Each task takes a matter of minutes. I would often demonstrate 'badly' and then 'better', just to show the differences that are possible. I stressed that it was a tool I used on specific occasions and only once or twice a term with my students. Ideally they would have a 'voice lab studio' to go to in their college but sadly that is not the option for my singers.

I suggest you use your own spectrogram programme and just experiment with the picture that comes out. In my report comparing programmes I discuss some of the dangers of interpreting the screen.

1. Attack and onset of sound – appropriate for genre, CCM and Jazz slides, Classical singing with clear onset
2. Vowel colours – looking at the 5 open Italian vowel sounds first, comparing them, looking for common features
3. Consonant clarity – very useful for lazy speakers
4. Dipthong danger – so many songs have dipthongs this is a clear way to see when the vowel changes
5. Pitch accuracy – this can be too 'honest' for some of our beginners but used sensitively it can really help students

6. Staccato and legato singing – this helps the singers distinguish good articulation
7. Vocal energy – very obvious with brighter colours
8. Breathy and pressed phonation – play with the sounds of your own voice and see what happens
9. Emotional breathing – how we approach a note
10. Final consonant and word endings with energy
11. Changes in the octave pattern
12. Descending scales –listening for breaks or sudden changes in tone

It is important for the teacher to get to know the programme and what it does to his or her own voice, but be aware of the limitations.