

# Voice Lessons as Observed Practice



Brian Manternach

If we want to become enlightened, we must go to a teacher and receive some instructions. But once we receive instructions, the most important thing is to put them into practice. Only through practice can we hope to achieve enlightenment.

—Thich Thien-An, *Zen Philosophy, Zen Practice*<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

**W**E HAVE ALL HEARD THE CLICHÉS about practice. “Practice makes perfect.” Or is it, “Only perfect practice makes perfect”? Or does practicing with a “No mistakes allowed” approach make us too afraid to explore new ways of doing things, as argued by performance psychologist Noa Kageyama (the *Bulletproof Musician*)?<sup>2</sup>

While the “how” and “how much” elements of practice are frequently discussed and debated, it is well established that practice is, indeed, important. To this end, author and voice pedagogue Lynn Holding offers some cognitive perspectives on the process and benefits of practice in *The Musician’s Mind: Teaching, Learning, and Performance in the Age of Brain Science*.

Research into the biochemistry of the brain reveals that the more difficult the task, the more neuronal firing from our brains is required; in essence, we must dig deeper for more complicated tasks. In related findings, researchers have concluded that the solutions learners work out for themselves, through effort, are truly learned and are thus retained and retrievable. Taken together, repeated firing of the neurons creates a neural pathway that becomes stronger each time it is activated during learning . . . this is the explanation of what happens in working memory, and not incidentally, this is the neuroscientific definition of *practice*.<sup>3</sup>

Holding explains that, with enough practice, difficult tasks become easier, are stored in long-term memory, and are eventually mastered.<sup>4</sup> Due to its importance, Ted Cooper argues, “Practicing is not something we can just talk about. It must be a subject we do with students if they are to develop a practical understanding about how to work independently.”<sup>5</sup> He advocates using lesson time to help students develop positive practice habits and to make the refinement of those habits “part of every lesson we teach.”<sup>6</sup> This is especially crucial if, as Holding indicates, the solutions students work out for themselves are the ones they truly learn.

Assuming we do guide our students toward effective practice habits, how can we be sure they are actually following those protocols when they are outside our watchful view? Detailed practice logs certainly may help. In depth

discussions with the students also may give us a glimpse into their independent practice. But, if “seeing is believing,” we may learn even more by actually watching our students independently practice, without interrupting them to provide feedback.

When public health concerns due to the COVID-19 pandemic forced studio teachers onto online platforms, I decided to use one voice lesson with each of my students as an observed practice session. Since we were already contending with the many differences in voice lesson procedures by shifting our lessons to Zoom, I thought it would be a good time to introduce one more new element. Observed practice is actually well suited to online teaching, since it is less reliant on back and forth communication that can be disrupted by delayed audio, frozen video, and unstable Internet connections during online lessons.

This column outlines the process of observed practice I followed with my students. I summarize some of the most common trends I saw among the students and I share the feedback they provided on what they felt were the most useful elements as well as the limitations of the process.

### PROCEDURE FOR AN OBSERVED PRACTICE LESSON

After each student had completed two weeks of online lessons and I felt everyone was sufficiently familiar with the format, I announced to each of them that the following week’s lessons would be run as observed practice sessions. Their task would be to perform vocal warmups and voice-building exercises for 15 consecutive minutes, as they do when they are practicing independently. I explained that I would mute my audio and stop my video (so as not to distract them or offer any inadvertent feedback through my facial expressions) and I would interrupt them only at the conclusion of the 15 minutes. At that point, they should continue with 10 more minutes of uninterrupted work on repertoire (songs of their choosing from the repertoire they are working on in lessons). I emphasized that they did not need to prepare anything special for this lesson—whatever they do when they are practicing independently is what they should do for the observed practice session so that I can get an honest window into the way they practice when they are on their own. Meanwhile, safely out of video view, I would write down my observations and we would discuss them at the conclusion of the lesson.

I do make a point to regularly discuss practice protocols and procedures in lessons as a way to guide students’ independent practicing. I encourage them to divide their practice time into multiple short sessions that have specific purposes (blocked, distributed practice, as outlined by voice pedagogue John Nix),<sup>7</sup> but also to vary the exercises they use in those sessions. We discuss that, when warming up the voice, students should choose specific exercises in a specific order that is designed to gradually get the voice going. Then, when working on a certain aspect of technique, they intentionally should choose voice building exercises that are particular to the skill they are addressing. We discuss how challenging passages from the repertoire they are learning can be excerpted and turned into vocalises that can be drilled outside the context of the entire song or aria. We also discuss the importance of varying their practice routines as they progress, as well as the conditions under which they practice (e.g., location, time of day) and to gradually add distractions when they are ready (like an observer/audience) as a way to check on their progress via the core concepts of motor learning, as outlined by Ingo Titze and Katherine Verdolini Abbott.<sup>8</sup> I also remind them to include periods of rest in order to avoid the vocal fatigue that can result from overpracticing or from front loading their practice sessions with too much demanding singing before they are truly warmed up.

Not only are these the main elements I encourage students to incorporate when they practice, but they are also the principles that guide how I structure most of the lessons I teach, in an attempt to provide a weekly example of how they can shape their independent practice time.

The observed practice lesson, then, should reveal which aspects of my instruction on independent practice are being heeded and how effectively they are being implemented. It can also reveal which aspects are not being followed, which can lead to discussions and potential changes in tactics.

### TEACHER TAKEAWAYS FROM OBSERVED PRACTICE

#### Warm-Ups/Voice-Building Exercises

Overall, I was encouraged by our observed practice sessions. I was grateful to see that the majority of exercises

the students chose were the same—or variations of—the exercises we use in our lessons together. The students were singing mindfully, monitoring their actions by touch and by observing themselves in mirrors, as needed. And most were choosing a progression of exercises that indicated they were working with an intentional plan and not just choosing exercises haphazardly.

Many students used recorded exercises from previous voice lessons as a guide for their vocalizations. For those students, my most frequent feedback comment was to remind them that they are free to deviate from the recordings when they feel it is warranted. I pointed out that, while I do tailor the exercises in lessons to best address the capabilities and the needs of each student's individual voice, exercises are also chosen symbiotically in reaction to what I am hearing from students on specific days. If they are feeling vocally different when they practice than they did on the day of the lesson, then the recorded exercises might either push students too hard or not present enough of a challenge.

I also cautioned many of the students not to compete with the volume of the recording as they are singing along, especially if they are playing it through an external speaker that can reach significantly higher volume levels than a smartphone or a laptop computer. Due to the Lombard effect, students may be subconsciously prone to singing louder than normal when vocalizing along with recorded exercises.

In several cases, when listening to students' previous lessons (which included both their singing and my instructions), I was struck by my tendency to offer feedback without having given the students sufficient time to process and evaluate their own performance. There were instances where I heard myself giving lengthy explanations that included greater detail than was necessary in the moment (fortunately, the students were generally not shy about skipping ahead in the recordings to get back to the singing). I also caught myself giving concurrent feedback, shouting instructions or affirmations as the students were singing. As voice pedagogue Lynn Maxfield points out in "Improve Your Students' Learning by Improving Your Feedback," although concurrent feedback can improve a student's immediate performance, it can also create a dependency on the teacher that may harm long-term learning if the student cannot recreate the same results during independent

practice.<sup>9</sup> In this respect, these observed practice sessions highlighted that some of my own instructional practices could use some adjusting.

Several of the students worked without using pre-recorded lessons as a guide. Three of these students spent a significant amount of time seated on a piano bench while they were singing, one of whom played along with nearly every vocalise. I advised them that sitting may not encourage the most optimal use of the body for singing and that playing along may divide their attention in a way that does not allow their full focus to be on their singing (allowing for the fact that it could be an effective distraction when they are in the later stages of motor learning).

Two of the students who did not vocalize along with a recording also did not use a piano or even a keyboard app as a way to provide a point of reference for their singing. These students simply vocalized according to feel, ascending and descending by sometimes odd intervals. After the lesson, I asked the students why they chose not to use a keyboard to guide their vocalizing. One responded that he usually did use a keyboard app but that it is on his phone, which was occupied for the Zoom call (a fact I wish I would have known at the start of the lesson). The other student said that he also usually uses a keyboard, but he did not for our lesson because he wondered if it might be considered "cheating." I assured him it was not, reminding him that we use a piano in our in-person lessons.

For many students, I had to emphasize that they do not have to vocalize for the entire practice time. These observed practice sessions were 25 minutes long. It would be difficult to find staged roles in music theater or even opera where characters sing continuously for 25 minutes straight without at least some breaks to step off stage or for other characters to sing. I encouraged them to work periods of rest into their practicing or, at least, periods of lighter vocalization—perhaps with semi-occluded vocal tract (SOVT) exercises—to bring balance to the session.

### **Repertoire Work**

Again, I was mostly pleased with what I saw from the 10-minute sessions of repertoire work. Many students began with a runthrough of a song they had performance ready as a check-in before moving on to a different song

that required more tedious but necessary work, like learning the notes or rhythms of a song or doing focused technical work on difficult sections of music.

One observation that did call for feedback was the tendency (especially among younger students) to simply run through a song and then move on, even if the song had noticeable errors or rough spots. For these students, I suggested a “no time like the present” approach of actually addressing known errors before moving on; or, at minimum, they should make notes about what needed to be fixed so they could return later to make the needed corrections. Even for students whose initial runthrough was fairly clean, I encouraged them to run the song again with a different focus before moving on. Perhaps they can choose more active motivations for their characters (infuriated instead of angry; desperate instead of disappointed). Maybe they can intentionally sing with different timbral goals (warmer, brighter, heftier, floatier, twangier), or with different technical goals in mind (using a beltier mix, singing with a different approach to breath management, focusing on freedom at the head/neck/jaw/tongue). This process will give a specific purpose to each runthrough and encourage exploration, rather than simply running their songs for the sake of repetition, which may potentially ingrain certain negative habits.

After the students completed their observed practice session, I reemerged from the cybervoid and we discussed my observations. In each case, I was able to offer encouragement on what I felt were positive and effective aspects of their practicing as well as suggestions for ways to make their practicing even more efficient.

## STUDENT FEEDBACK

The following week, when students logged in for their next lessons, I asked for their feedback on the observed practice session. In addition to inviting general feedback, I also asked:

- Did you find the session useful or was it just awkward?
- Were you ever able to forget that you were being observed, or were you hyperconscious of the fact that you were being watched?
- Did it feel like practice or did you feel like you were performing?

- Did you feel it was a good use of lesson time, or would you have rather had a regular lesson?

In their responses, some students admitted that it was a little “weird” to be observed and that they at first felt “flustered” or “stressed” since it seemed like “performing for my teacher.” Even so, most said that they eventually settled in and felt the sessions were genuine representations of what they do when they are practicing on their own. Some even felt the fact that they were being observed made them more efficient than they often are.

One student said, “I didn’t necessarily feel like I was performing for you, I just wanted to make sure that I was practicing well. So that’s as productive as my practice sessions ever get.”

Another student offered, “I was conscious of, ‘What should I be doing?’ and ‘Am I doing what he would want me to be doing?’ But, in a way, it actually made me focus on those questions rather than just going through the motions, which I sometimes do on my own.”

Yet another student said, “I didn’t like it in the moment because I was wondering if there was some expectation that I wasn’t meeting. I was making assumptions about your expectations. But I appreciated the feedback and I practiced more beforehand because I wanted to be prepared for you to see me practice.”

Other students felt the feedback they received after the lesson was the most valuable element of the exercise. One student said, “It was good to get more insight on how I practice because obviously we spend a lot more time practicing on our own than we do with you in a voice lesson.”

Another student observed, “I liked that you got to see how I’m working by myself. I have struggled with finding a [practice] routine in the past.”

Many students appreciated the focus on developing their own independence. One said, “I’m not always going to have you there. So, having you there while I’m practicing myself and then having your feedback helps me wrap my brain around things I could do differently.”

One student said, “I wish I had had more of that direction my freshman and sophomore year,” and another suggested we use observed practice as “a semesterly check-in, maybe before breaks,” as a way to polish up practice habits before they head into a stretch of time where they will not be having regular lessons.

## CONCLUSION

In my estimation, it was a worthwhile experiment to dedicate most of an entire lesson to observed practice. If done regularly, some of the students' initial awkwardness may dissipate, and we could shorten the amount of time spent on the exercise. For instance, students could be given just the first 10 minutes of a lesson to warm up without interruption, as they do when they are on their own. Teachers could ask students to spend 10 minutes rehearsing one particular song in order to observe the way they approach more focused repertoire work. It may also be useful to do a "narrated practice session" where students "show their work" by verbalizing their thought processes as they go through an interval of observed practice. This could be particularly useful in identifying the reasoning that feeds their choices when practicing, which, arguably, is more important than simply identifying what specific exercises they select. Also, as mentioned above, blocks of observed practice can alleviate some of the spontaneous back and forth communication that can be difficult to negotiate in online platforms, with teachers offering feedback in chunks rather than in an "as you go" approach.

The quote from Thich Thien-An at the beginning of this column recognizes the crucial role teachers play in their students' learning processes by providing valuable instruction. And yet, it also acknowledges that the most important element of this exchange is for students to put those instructions into practice. Accordingly, observed practice sessions may be a useful way for teachers to positively influence their students' practice as they journey toward their most enlightened singing.

## NOTES

1. Thich Thien-An, *Zen Philosophy, Zen Practice* (Berkeley, CA: Dharma Publishing, 1975), 25.
2. Noa Kageyama, "The Problem with 'Perfect' Practice"; <https://bulletproofmusician.com/the-problem-with-perfect-practice/> (accessed April 30, 2020).
3. Lynn Helding, *The Musician's Mind: Teaching, Learning, and Performance in the Age of Brain Science* (Lanham, MD: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 2020), 106.
4. Ibid.
5. Ted Cooper, "Small Moments, Big Impact: Teaching First Year Students how to Practice," *American Music Teacher* 54, no. 2 (October/November 2004): 33–34.
6. Ibid.
7. John Nix, "Best Practices: Using Exercise Physiology and Motor Learning Principles in the Teaching Studio and the Practice Room," *Journal of Singing* 74, no. 2 (November/December 2017): 217.
8. Ingo R. Titze and Katherine Verdolini-Abbott, *Vocology: The Science and Practice of Voice Habilitation* (Salt Lake City, UT: National Center for Voice and Speech, 2012), 219–220.
9. Lynn Maxfield, "Improve Your Students' Learning by Improving Your Feedback," *Journal of Singing* 69, no. 4 (March/April 2013): 474.

**Brian Manternach** is on the voice faculty of the University of Utah Department of Theatre, is a research associate for the National Center for Voice and Speech, and maintains a private voice studio. His current and former students have been cast in national and international Broadway tours as well as in regional Equity theatres, cruise lines, and in amusement parks.

A recipient of the NATS Voice Pedagogy Award, he has given presentations for the Voice Foundation, PAVA, VASTA, Summer Vocology Institute, University of Utah Voice Disorders Center, TEDxSaltLakeCity, and for NATS at chapter, regional, and national conferences.

An associate editor for the *Journal of Singing*, he is also a regular contributor to *Classical Singer* magazine. Additionally, he has written articles for the *Journal of Voice*, *Voice and Speech Review*, *VOICEPrints*, *College Music Symposium*, *NATS Inter Nos*, and the *Music Theatre Educators' Alliance Journal*. He also contributed a chapter to *The Voice Teacher's Cookbook* (Meredith Music, 2018).

Manternach has made solo appearances with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, Cleveland Chamber Symphony, and Sinfonia Salt Lake, among others, and his stage credits range from Belmonte in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* to Eisenstein in *Die Fledermaus* to Miles Gloriosus in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*.

Originally from Iowa, his degrees in voice performance include a BA from St. John's University/College of St. Benedict of Minnesota, an MM from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and a DM from the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music. He is also an NCVS-trained Vocologist, having completed the coursework of the Summer Vocology Institute.