

Your Voice Matters to Our Health

Lynn Maxfield



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THIS PAST FALL, I ATTENDED the inaugural master class from the Mayo Clinic Center for Humanities in Medicine. The topic of the evening was, broadly, “Music and the Mind,” and the guests were neuroscientist, musician, and author Daniel Levitin and GRAMMY winning bassist and author Victor Wooten. At one point the discussion turned to how developed societies have shifted toward engaging with music as observers rather than participants. We have moved from singing, drumming, and dancing in families and communities, to building grand performance halls where only the select few are allowed to present their performance for the rest of us, while we must remain silent. The communication of art is no longer a conversation, but a monologue. To this point, Victor Wooten said, “When you are having a conversation with another person, no one ever says, ‘Wow, you talk so well! I’m going to stop talking. I would never call myself a talker around *you!*’ And yet, I hear that all the time as a musician.” He went on to explain that he feels that this sentiment is a disservice to the role of music in our lives and in societies, and I must agree.

I have written before about the need to encourage creativity for the sake of the process and less for the sake of the outcome.¹ This need was reinforced to me in a recent conversation I had with a singer who has found considerable relief from a multiplicity of chronic health concerns she faces through her singing practice. This singer stressed that the value is in the doing and that the benefits are ignorant of the quality of performance or the audience. I was pondering this conversation when our I received an email reminding the editorial board that this issue of the *Journal of Singing* would coincide with World Voice Day, this year’s theme of which is “Your Voice Matters.” How serendipitous.

In America, and indeed much of the world, we are facing endemic mental health challenges and the younger generations are shouldering much of these burdens. As much as 29% of children and adolescents currently suffer from depression and 26% experience anxiety. Symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder and sleep disorders reach a staggering 46% of this population.² A challenge so widespread requires a multifaceted approach, and it is heartening to see the American healthcare system begin to (slowly) adopt a more integrative model of health and wellness.³ Centers for integrative health, wellness, and medicine are emerging across the country, led by philanthropies like the Bernard Osher Foundation, and federal agencies are opening avenues for the acceptance of research into a broader range of factors influencing health outcomes.⁴

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YOUR STUDENTS' VOICES MATTER

Out of this integrative approach to medicine has emerged an increasing body of research identifying strong impacts of music participation on human stress and anxiety responses. A recent meta-analysis reviewed 104 randomized clinical trials, with a combined 9,617 subjects, that investigated music interventions for stress reduction.⁵ Music interventions (both participatory and experiential) had moderate positive effects on physiological measures of stress such as heart rate, blood pressure, and cortisol levels. Similarly, several trials showed music to have positive impacts on emotional states such as worry and restlessness.

Two important factors must be considered when evaluating the applicability of this research to a potential mental health benefit to be had from active study of singing. First, the express intent of the music *interventions* reported in this meta-analysis was to reduce stress and improve mental health. Clearly this is not the primary goal of most singing studios, nor should it be; but, perhaps singing studios have a larger role to play in societal health and well-being. Perhaps creating a space and a practice where improving the quality of life of singers can be *one* of the goals in singing studios.

How? This question is in part answered by the second factor: Music interventions with the strongest neurological effects, decreasing stressed emotional states and moderating arousal, were based on improvisation.⁶ What makes improvisation so special? It turns off the amygdala, an evolutionarily primitive part of our brain responsible for identifying threats and initiating biological responses to those threats. In a gross oversimplification, in order to improvise, singers are hotwiring their brains to skip risk assessment. For that activity, the process is more important than the outcome. Their voice matters more than their performance. While it is unreasonable to expect that improvisation will become a *major* part of most singing studios, teachers *can* create opportunities for singers to explore improvisational activities that focus on the process of singing more than the outcome.

TEACHERS' VOICES MATTER

If there are ways to create mental health-centric teaching practices in singing studios in order to benefit student

singers, arguably the most efficacious strategy would be to protect and improve the mental health of singing teachers. After all, mental health crises threaten to remove teachers from the classroom/studio altogether, thus eliminating the opportunity for students to take part.⁷ But the impact of teacher mental health on their students is more nuanced than that. A 2019 study of teacher mental health and student well-being found evidence that improved teacher well-being correlated with better student mental health and well-being.⁸ The authors attributed this association with the impact mental health had on the teachers' abilities to perform their jobs, be present, and to develop meaningful positive relationships with their students.

These results lend credence to the old adage that you cannot pour from an empty cup. In a profession where so much of our effort is devoted to the progress of the other person in the room, it appears that we would be wise to acknowledge the importance of our own health on the probability of that other person achieving progress. In other words, fellow teachers, Your Voice Matters (too).

NOTES

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I dwell in Possibility –
 A fairer House than Prose –
 More numerous of Windows –
 Superior – for Doors –

 Of Chambers as the Cedars –
 Impregnable of eye –
 And for an everlasting Roof
 The Gambrels of the Sky –

 Of Visitors – the fairest –
 For Occupation – This –
 The spreading wide my narrow Hands
 To gather Paradise –

Emily Dickinson,
 "I dwell in Possibility"

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