The Screamed and Belted Song of the Self

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Let's not kid ourselves: the ascendance of American Idol, and its turning of music into sports, signals the end of American popular song as we know it. Its ritual slaughter of songs allows no message to be carried, no wisdom to be communicated, other than the screamed and belted song of the self.

These words were penned by New York Times music critic Stephen Holden as he both marveled at and mourned the voice of the great singer Barbara Cook during a live performance at the legendary Café Carlyle in 2005. Marveled because, as Holden observed, Cook's "magnificent voice has the emotional viscosity of time in a bottle"; mourned because her "get-up-and-go attitude exemplifies an all-too-quaint attribute called character." Since Holden's prescient article was published, I have opened every fall semester voice class with a full reading of it, hoping that his eloquence will impress upon my new crop of eager young college students the many-stranded aspirations that I hold for them all: that they will revel in the joy of discovery, test their own limits (both of the voice and of the spirit), and exult in the success of their own hard work.

But I also hope that Holden's words will convey a deeper message, one that is more urgent than ever in the age of that "toxic singing contest" called American Idol, whose "clueless judges" treat songs as nothing more than "stunts in a gymnastic competition that rewards crude physical prowess." Combating the debasement of a genre that singers revere starts with the basic premise that the motivation to sing must surpass simple self-expression. If it has any hope of becoming a self-sustaining endeavor, singing must be about more than just ourselves. It must be, as Holden exhorted, about messages delivered through the union of poetry and song that shines some fleeting light upon our shared existence. It need not always be beautiful; indeed, poetry set to music calls for expression via the myriad sounds we have available in our throats. But singing must always, even among the least profound song samples, be about some shred of communicated wisdom that allows a momentary illumination of both our current condition and our aspirations for our collective future.

The pursuit of artistic singing plays out not as one great, glitzy extended talent show, but much more like a pilgrimage. It is, quite simply, a calling; and once called, it becomes pretty clear that one is going to need a sturdy tool kit to persevere. As Richard Miller eloquently observed,

Artistry cannot be realized without the technical means for its presentation. Systematic vocal technique and artistic expression are inseparable; they comprise the structure of singing.
Thus, as any teacher knows, the first step in this journey is the long slog toward technical mastery. But for many young beginners, their primary motivation is the drive for self-expression. This contradiction, and its ensuing friction, forms the very core of the dynamic relationship between teacher and student. The reconciliation of this contradiction is the organic and entwined processes of teaching and learning.

**DRIVE: WHAT MOTIVATES US**

Author and speaker Daniel Pink’s latest book is an exploration of what motivates human behavior (especially in the workplace), based on the most recent cognitive science. Contrary to our behaviorist legacy of extrinsic rewards leveraged through the traditional tools of carrots and sticks, the research shows that there are three intrinsic motivators that keep us fired up enough to pursue everything from our paycheck to our dreams: **autonomy**, which is the ability to be self-directed; **mastery**, the process that drives us to keep improving; and **purpose**, the sense that what we do produces something that transcends ordinary experience, and serves a meaningful purpose beyond ourselves.

**Autonomy**

In the previous column, I explored the topic of professional autonomy. Studies in behavioral psychology reveal that the level of professional autonomy that workers enjoy is directly related to their job satisfaction. Freelance singers and independent studio instructors enjoy this kind of sovereignty outright. Those who teach voice within an institution also enjoy a certain level of independence, which tends to increase with seniority and rank.

In all settings, autonomy in working life is desirable for several reasons. First, autonomy affords a level of control over one’s schedule, and research in cognitive psychology has long demonstrated that the more control we feel over our lives, the more satisfaction we feel. This satisfaction not only attends the present, but positively affects our future prospects as well, by inculcating optimism in our projected ability to change our circumstances.

Further, freedom to construct one’s own work schedule allows room for related professional activities, such as performing, guest teaching, public lecturing, and writing. Since these activities require travel and flexible scheduling, this aspect of professional status can be invaluable when placed within the context of a career in the performing arts. Career demands in the arts include networking, rehearsal time, and practice time—with “time” being the critical component. Indeed, time is the one essential requirement common to all creative pursuits, as consistently revealed in studies on creativity.

**Mastery**

As attractive and beneficial as the attribute of autonomy is, I posit that mastery is the critical centerpiece in Pink’s trio of intrinsic motivators, for the simple reason that achieving mastery comprises the longest period of a musician’s training—approximately 10,000 hours, it appears. But mastery also carries singular attributes that are worth pausing to consider; mastery is the most elusive attribute for the learner to achieve, yet in this age of American Idol, it is both the hardest pill to swallow and the hardest lesson a teacher must dish out. Mastery is surely not a foreign concept to mature musicians, yet to novice musicians at the very beginning of the journey, mastery can seem, at best, like a quaint yet antique notion, at worst, like an odious chore that one dodges at every opportunity instead of, well, digging into mastering it.

According to Pink, the research on mastery suggests that it abides by three laws: mastery is a mindset (more on this below), mastery is a pain (this one is brutally simple—achieving mastery involves unglamorous toil, few rewards, and in certain domains like sports, even pain), and finally, mastery is impossible to completely attain.

The first of Pink’s three laws, mastery is a mindset, refers to the groundbreaking work of psychology researcher Carol Dweck. Dweck has identified and dubbed two “mindsets”: one that is open to change and learning is called the “growth mindset,” and the other, infected by the “talent myth,” is hardened into the “fixed mindset.”

Students who have been brainwashed from birth with the talent myth tend to clutch their talent as a talisman, wielding it to ward off the unpleasant drudgework of practice. Thus they grow ever disdainful of effort, which they have been taught is essentially unnecessary, due the
magic of their natural gifts. Of course, such thinking is unsustainable, as a close reading of any Wunderkind's biography will show. How such people persevere is often a sad story indeed; but what is more tragic is what the fixed mindset does to more ordinary learners, possessed of not special, but average gifts. These learners often never even get off the ground, so paralyzed are they by Pink's second and third laws combined: if mastery is a pain and impossible to completely attain, why bother? This kind of thinking is hazardous to mastery, but in the age of American Idol, it is downright toxic. Think of it: if you were a very young singer on the cusp of the learning journey, what would you prefer if faced with the following two choices? One, a never ending path filled with effort, marked by grit, and only occasionally punctuated by kudos, or the other, a quick road to easy acclaim in the wake of American Idol, via the ubiquitous talent shows that have sprung up across the country to feed its spinoffs, like America's Got Talent.

Where I live, homegrown talent shows have proven to be successful fundraisers for philanthropic associations such as United Way. Young singers are praised for their effort (and not necessarily for their product), and mistake such praise by the hometown crowd for critical acclaim. Student clubs regularly produce a cappella "sing-offs," which feature all the trappings Holden warned of, including crass sexual jokes and cat-calls from the audience.

Certainly, one can argue that these settings support a mostly recreational pursuit of singing; if mastery is not sought, it will not be achieved, and more to the point, what is the harm? Must every song carry a message? Must every singer seek to communicate wisdom? Perhaps not. Yet consider what could happen if every public performance becomes subject to the collective taste of its mass audience, an audience no longer accustomed to sitting quietly in the dark, waiting to be transported; an audience, on the contrary, accustomed to making its opinions loudly known and provoking the wisdom of the crowd to dictate the actions of the performers. Combine this scenario with a commercial mindset, and performers on stage no longer have the stage, but are merely paid employees primed to dance to the tune the audience shouts for. Lack of artistic autonomy may seem a small price to pay to a young wannabe, so it is small wonder that this fate seems to befall many an Idol winner. And if you are dubious that so-called "crowdsourced" live entertainment is not coming to a concert hall near you, think again.

Recently, in separate but unabashed bids to engage young adults, both the Indianapolis Symphony and the New York Philharmonic invited audience members to choose the encore they most wanted to hear by text-messaging their votes during the concert. An opera company invited audience members to determine the ending of Mozart's Così fan tutte by texting their "vote on who marries whom in the climactic wedding scene." True, these couplings of old art forms with new technology can be tossed off as nothing more than harmless flirtations, and perhaps they were. But such dalliances have paved the way for bolder audience responses, which will prove harder to resist as we become culturally accustomed to them.

Just ask Steve Martin how his public interview at New York's innovative cultural center, the 92nd Street Y (also known as 92YTribeCa), went down when, unbeknownst to him, viewers who watched the telecast were simultaneously encouraged to send in emails. Veteran art scholar and New York Times reporter Deborah Solomon was in mid-interview with Martin about his novel, An Object Of Beauty, when the Y's management dispatched a staff member to actually trample on stage and interrupt the interview with a note demanding that Solomon cease discussing "art" and switch to interviewing Martin about his comedy career. This was as jarring and disheartening as a cellphone jangle during an Act V soliloquy. I did not know who had sent this note nor that it was in response to those e-mails. Regardless, it was hard to get on track, any track, after the note's arrival, and finally, when I answered submitted questions that had been selected by the people in charge, I knew I would have rather died onstage with art talk than with the predictable questions that had been chosen for me... I have no doubt that, in time, and with some cooperation from the audience, we would have achieved ignition. I have been performing a long time, and I can tell when the audience's attention is straying. I do not need a note.

The insult didn't stop there; after the event concluded, the Y's craven manager offered the audience a full refund. Martin left the stage and tweeted, "So the 92nd St. Y has determined that the course of its interviews should be dictated in real time by its audience's emails.
Artists beware. A columnist for Salon.com opined, "Audience whines about an interview being too high falutin, so refunds are offered. Is all art up to a vote now?"

Pink’s third law of mastery is that it is impossible to ever completely attain, but it is precisely this quality that keeps "growth mindset" people paradoxically in pursuit of it. I would add that, for artists anyway, mastery is the best defense against philistinism. But it is no guarantee. Just because an artist presents him or herself as a master performer does not ensure that the audience will recognize or even respect it. Given that live performance depends upon the audience’s collective, positive reception, what performers may need to prepare for is a scenario in which an audience feels entitled to participate in performance art as it plays out in real time, entitled, essentially, to coauthorship.

I can’t help wondering what we might have said if we hadn’t been stopped. Maybe we were just around the corner from something thrilling. Isn’t that the nature of a live conversation? It halts, it stutters, it doubles back, it soars. We might have found a small nugget, something off topic or unexpected, that wouldn’t have warranted the refund that was offered.

If the e-mailers could have lived with "I am unamused" for just a little longer, or had given us some understanding based on past performance, or even a little old-fashioned respect, something worthwhile, unusual or calamitous might have emerged. Who knows, maybe I would have ended up singing my novel.

If witnessing mastery proves insufficient to tame an audience’s churlishness, the only element left to the artist that is unassailable is purpose.

Purpose

Pink locates purpose at the center of his trio of three factors that lead to better performance, insofar as purpose "provides a context for its two mates," and notes that

Autonomous people working toward mastery perform at very high levels. But those who do so in the service of some greater objective can achieve even more. The most deeply motivated people—not to mention those who are most productive and satisfied—hitch their desires to a cause larger than themselves.

People who possess great empathy (for example, those who provide health and safety services for others), understand this; they live out their lives by the creed of higher purpose. Performers, who typically possess above average egos, may eschew purpose as meaningless, particularly if few hardships were encountered on the road to mastery. Young performers may simply be unaware of purpose, particularly if their primary motivation, self-expression, hasn’t been alive long enough in their souls to have been tempered.

Eventually though, the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune assail us all, albeit in disproportionate measure. If it is true that what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger, it is equally true that a purposeless life is often repurposed, as it were, by calamity. There is nothing like a brush with death or a broken heart to force a confrontation with the fundamental questions of existence, not to mention the question, "Why sing?"

Then, to be or not to be is not the question; how to be is the issue, and therein lies the seed of what Pink calls "the purpose motive."

At whatever stage of life the purpose seed is planted, it takes a variety of factors to bring it to full flower—time and nourishment, to be sure. But, when applied to young learners, the instillation of purpose requires an external aide: it requires a teacher. Even Pink acknowledges, in the last chapter of his book, that

purpose is another matter. Being able to contemplate the big picture, to ponder one’s own mortality, to understand the paradox that attaining certain goals isn’t the answer, seem to require having spent a few years on the planet.

As much as institutions matter, and as much as they spend tremendous resources creating rich learning environments, studies in education repeatedly show the enormous impact of just one caring, adult mentor in the life of a learner. In higher education, this issue has taken on increasing urgency due to rising tuition costs and the economic threat of “MOOCs” (massive open online courses), which has caused consumers to question the value of a residential college experience. The value, of course, is found in the human interaction inherent in traditional learning arrangements, comprised of both the intellectual and social environment found there. Yet,

Who is responsible for creating these healthy, caring environments? Whose job is it to ensure that students find social and intellectual community? We can’t simply expect them to grow up, get serious, and be adults if we aren’t willing to show them the way. Students need caring adults and supportive peers in order to successfully navigate their journey to adulthood.
In that spirit, I offer a final reading in closing, one that I also share at the beginning of each academic year, but not with my eager young first-years. This poem I send around to inspire a few fellow colleagues with the humanity that must attend the annual ritual of challenging young minds, of molding immature voices into instruments of purpose capable of expressing a more profound message than the screamed and belted song of the self.

"SEA OF FAITH"

John Brehm

Once when I was teaching “Dover Beach” to a class of freshmen, a young woman raised her hand and said, “I’m confused about this ‘Sea of Faith’.” “Well,” I said, “let’s talk about it. We probably need to talk a bit about figurative language. What confused you about it?”

“I mean, is it a real sea?” she asked.

“You mean, is it a real body of water that you could point to on a map or visit on a vacation?”

“Yes,” she said. “Is it a real sea?”

Oh Christ, I thought, is this where we are? Next year I’ll be teaching them the alphabet and how to sound words out.

I’ll have to teach them geography, apparently, before we can move on to poetry.

I’ll have to teach them history, too—a few weeks on the Dark Ages might be instructive.

“Yes,” I wanted to say, “it is. It is a real sea. In fact it flows right into the Sea of Ignorance IN WHICH YOU ARE DROWNING. Let me throw you a Rope of Salvation before the Sharks of Desire gobble you up. Let me hoist you back up onto this Ship of Fools so that we might continue our search for the Fountain of Youth. Here, take a drink of this. It’s fresh from the River of Forgetfulness.”

But of course I didn’t say any of that. I tried to explain in such a way as to protect her from humiliation, tried to explain that poets often speak of things that don’t exist. It was only much later that I wished I could have answered differently, only after I’d betrayed myself and been betrayed that I wished it was true, wished there really was a Sea of Faith that you could wade out into, dive under its blue and magic waters, hold your breath, swim like a fish down to the bottom, and then emerge again able to believe in everything, faithful and unafraid to ask even the simplest of questions, happy to have them simply answered.

NOTES


2. Ibid.


Lynn Helding


17. Martin.

18. Pink, 133.

19. Ibid., 144.


22. John Brehm, "Sea of Faith" (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, October, 2004); reprinted by permission of the poet.

Lynn Helding has sung throughout the United States, Europe, Australia, and Iceland, where her performances were broadcast on Icelandic National Radio. Her lecture series "Connecting Voice Science to Vocal Art" illuminates ongoing research in cognitive science, a field she claims "ushers in a paradigm shift in emphasis from how well teachers teach, to how well students learn."

Helding studied voice at the University of Montana with Esther England, in Vienna with Kammersänger Otto Edelmann, and at Indiana University with Dale Moore, where she was the first singer accepted to pursue the Artist Diploma. She earned the Master's Degree in Vocal Pedagogy from Westminster Choir College of Rider University, and studied vocology with Dr. Ingo Titze, Dr. Katherine Verdolini, and others at the Summer Vociology Institute of the National Center for Voice and Speech. In 2005, she was awarded the Van Lawrence Fellowship, given jointly by the Voice and NATS Foundations.

She served four years as a member of the voice faculty at Vanderbilt University, and is currently Associate Professor of Voice and Director of Performance Studies at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. She welcomes visitors and feedback to "Mindful Voice" at her website: www.lynn dickinson.com and communication at: helding@dickinson.edu.

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