

# A Voice Teacher Sings Out for the Art of Improvisation (AOI)

by Irene Feher

It was in late July 2013, when I (a classically trained singer and voice teacher) felt the wonderment of my first AOI experience with Music for People. Eager for another new and inspiring adventure, I walked into Lynn Miller's vocal track class. With a sparkle in her eye and a welcoming smile, Lynn guided our group into a glorious hour of vocal improvisation. There were no musical scores, no lyric sheets, and there was no pressure to be 'vocally perfect'. We stood in a circle and sang a cappella (without instrumental accompaniment) and made all kinds of inspiring music with our voices. Without breathing out one theoretical word, Lynn took us on a whirlwind journey through vocal traditions that have been, and continue to be practiced all over the world.

*I was having the time of my life but I was also learning about how I use my voice in a way that was very new to me: With the enthusiasm of a child, Lynn suddenly catches my eye and lets out this operatic sound that knocked me for a loop! What a lovely balanced full-bodied tone with even vibrato and intense expression (this is the voice teacher in me that can't help herself sometimes). I sing back – she smiles and sings again – I sing back – my concern for “how I sound” melts away – I feel all the tension in my shoulders and jaw release – my vocal utterance soars out – I am surprised and elated.*

*She invites us all to become opera singers. I am completely absorbed by one thought: almost every note feels so easy! I leave the class dumbfounded.*

I continued to attend Lynn's classes for the rest of the week, and allowed myself to sing out at many other MFP activities.

Upon my arrival home, I tried some improvising at my piano, and that was when I realized that I was reaching notes, high notes that had been eluding me on and off for many years, with tremendous ease. I was even more surprised when I started my standard vocal warm up, and felt the same old blocks on my high notes. I stopped, and I began to improvise by playing with the rhythms and notes of my vocal exercises – the high notes came out spinning. I asked myself: what is going on? Why is it that when I improvise, I can sing with more ease than when I sing something that is required of me from a score or a specific vocalise? Can our response to traditional approaches of teaching singing, or any instrument for that matter, interfere with our ability to sing/play?

My desire to understand the HOW of singing fires my passion for teaching. Over the years, I have been puzzling over why poised energetic learners, myself included, become stiff and unmusical as they try to "sing correctly" in the context of a voice lesson or rehearsal. This phenomenon has been written about in the field of somatics (approaches to neuro-muscular re-education). Teachers of the Alexander Technique and Feldenkrais method (forms of somatic education) encourage us to watch children as they learn naturally through trial and error. Often a child learns something through play, and she moves with tremendous ease and grace. Though concentrated on the action she is doing, her face remains focused yet relaxed. The child realizes when something feels right, and continues to do it – until she attains a level of mastery. Notice what happens when an adult appears with lots of well-meaning instructions, the child suddenly stiffens up and the graceful spontaneity of her exploration is no longer evident.

An author and educator who has left a particularly deep impression on me, is speech language pathologist, singer and singing teacher, Katherine Verdolini, who has done extensive research on the subject of motor skill acquisition theory and its application in vocal instruction. Let me briefly outline one of her main theories, and how it has helped me understand my experience at AOI.

Verdolini explains how we learn motor skills through implicit learning, which is learning without conscious awareness. We learn through observation, imitation, experience and interaction. We develop most of our mannerisms, speech habits, and basic motor skills in this manner. Although feedback, knowledge of results, is essential for learning, too much theoretical instruction is not necessarily better. Instead of being pounded with information we need the time to digest information and make it our own. I had the time to do exactly that at AOI: Without trying to impose any particular vocal model, Lynn set up basic structures that allowed me to sing freely with others in a playful manner. Because we were improvising and I did not fear that I would sing any “wrong notes”, I was interacting musically with others through trial and error, using nothing but my ears and intuition.

AOI provided me with an environment that allowed me the time and space to tap into my vocal abilities in a way that I never imagined or previously attempted. I allowed myself to learn naturally through trial and error. Instead of immediately responding to an outside stimulus such as the notation on a musical score, a teacher's request, or a conductor's baton, I took the time to actually notice, listen, and respond to what was happening INSIDE my own body and mind. The processes that I learned about in theory, became living realities that I could sense and feel. In retrospect, I remember the countless joyful hours that I spent making up songs that until now I attributed very little value. That point of view has changed, and in the words of W. A. Mathieu, I have chosen to be a life musician who hears music, singing in particular, all of the time.

I would like to conclude with a few tips for those who want to explore their own voices as they engage in Music for People activities.

The only "right" way to sing is a way that leaves you feeling energized, inspired and wanting to sing more. If you find that your voice feels a little tired or stuck when you join vocal activities, try the following strategies.

Use ALL of your senses as you engage in singing. Singing is dependent upon perceptual processes. Use your senses to observe what you are feeling before, and as you engage in making vocal utterances. When you improvise, you have all the time in the world - don't feel rushed to produce something. For example, take your time to actually experience what it "feels" like to open your mouth, take a deep breath and make a sound. You have done it many times in your life, such as when you wake up and stretch after a good sleep, receive some wonderful news from a loved one, step out into the country air, or after you have tasted freshly baked warm bread. It is gratifying to let out a big audible yawn, sigh or whoop! Open your mouth, we are not used to this - we have always been told to cover our mouths when we yawn or to keep our voices down. There are many ways to release the jaw and open the mouth. Play with different postures - which one feels best. Smile and let your mouth open as you let out a big laugh or Yea! energy sound.

Explore and use trial and error to make sounds that you have heard in your life. Little children do this all of the time, such as when they sing and make comic strip sounds. Use your voice to imitate sounds like an approaching train, a nagging person, or an old car. Imitate musical instruments - consonants and vowels are your orchestra or band.

Experiment with how you stand or sit when you sing. Use gestures as part of your creative expression. Permit yourself to feel the "maestro effect" by imitating the body language of your favourite, or not so favourite (that can be really fun) conductors, singers, actors, or people. Try caricatures of the opera singer, the rap singer or the crooner. These are images and sounds that are a part of our unique auditory and visual landscape and history. We can embody them through singing.

Practicing singing in this manner is not about being "right on" it is about finding what feels good and tapping into our creative resources. The voice is incredibly flexible, surprise yourself! I would like to offer my profound thanks to Lynn Miller and all of those at MFP for enriching my musical and vocal life.

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