

# Sing a Different Tune and Improvise! There Are “No Wrong Notes” and No “Poor Pitch Singers” by Irene Feher



*I can't carry a tune in a bucket! I've always wanted to learn how to sing, but I don't think I can.* These are common reactions I hear when I tell people that I teach singing. They then react with puzzlement and hope when I tell them they can learn how, but have not yet had suitable opportunities to do so. Is it not surprising that so many among us, including a large number of musicians (!), are unable to sing? We love to listen to vocal music, watch TV shows about singing, and go to concerts, yet the mere thought of singing a song inspires dread for many among us. In an attempt to support my belief that we all have the potential to sing, I will present some recent research on the causes of poor pitch-singing, my own ideas on how the environment has contributed to the existence of those causes, and how we can use vocal improvisation to nurture and develop our natural singing ability.

At the International Laboratory for Brain, Music, and sound research (BRAMS) in Montreal, Canada, Sean Hutchins and Isabelle Peretz conducted multiple studies which enabled them to define the main causes for poor pitch-singing, which include any one or combination of the following factors: perceptual deficit, memory deficit, motor deficit, and sensory-motor mismapping.

A perceptual deficit is the inability to hear a pitch or melody and reproduce it with the voice or on any instrument. (Hutchins & Peretz) I believe that aural perception for music-making is an ability that we all possess to a certain degree and we can choose to develop it as much as we want. Just about all of us are able to recognize familiar songs that we hear on the radio, and we have also experienced earworms, songs that get stuck in our head. We must work from that ability as we learn to listen more closely and vocally interact with what we hear. Music programs have required courses in "aural perception" or "ear training". In these classes students are required to take musical dictation (write down the notes and rhythms they hear). Many talented musicians, myself included, have struggled with this particular task because our minds are so filled with anxiety and self-doubt that we are unable to effectively listen to and retain what we have heard. This leads me to believe that in the majority of cases, perceptual and memory deficits can result from a mind that is distracted by fears or self-defeating thoughts, which occur if an aural perception exercise is too challenging. Just as we can learn to see and identify brush strokes in paintings, we can learn to hear musical detail. Group improvisation using call and response is an accessible, spontaneous, and interactive activity that keeps us in the moment of music making. As one playfully engages in call and response of short, simple and rhythmic melodic phrases, one learns to maintain a physical state of readiness and an open and focused mind, so one can hear, retain and imitate what they have just heard. "Sing what you play" is a more contemplative exercise that one can engage in alone. It must be done with patience and love. Start by playing one note on your instrument, then two notes and so on. Play and then sing each note with intention and feeling. Don't rush! Allow yourself to hear what you have just played in your head and then sing it. If you are not sure whether you sang the right note, play it again on your instrument, and sing along. If you are still not sure, record yourself doing the exercise and listen to your recording. Ask a fellow musician to practice with you and cheer you on as you find your way.

A motor deficit is the inability to vocally reproduce what one hears. In other words, one is able to play a melody that they hear note for note on their instrument, but they cannot sing it. (Hutchins & Peretz) This is the most common cause of poor pitch singing (Hutchins & Peretz) which I believe is the result of a lack of experience with singing. For example, many "natural singers" have grown up actively singing among family and friends without any fear of judgment. On the other hand, children who have been told they cannot sing, or whose parents are afraid to sing do not have the same opportunities to practice and develop their singing abilities. Many people have described embarrassing school experiences when they were told to stop singing because they were unable to sing along with the rest of the class. Sadly, there are a vast number of inspired music teachers who all-too-often unknowingly give out singing tasks that are beyond the capabilities of some children, and it is those children who

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quickly become discouraged and often stop singing altogether. (Welch) This would also explain why there are fine musicians who simply do not sing at all.

Graham Welch, a professor of music education has conducted extensive research on singing and vocal pitch matching development. He outlines four key stages that children go through as they learn to reproduce songs. In a nutshell they are: 1.) Chant-like singing within a narrow speech range; 2.) gradual expansion of the vocal range and growing ability to reproduce the general contour of a given melody, a sense of tonality starts to appear within individual phrases; 3.) Individual pitches of melodic phrases are mostly accurate with occasional tuning problems when singing outside of the usual vocal range; and, 4.) Accurate and musical reproduction of a simple song in a given tonality. (Welch) Whether a child moves through these stages depends on his/her actual singing experience. It is evident that it would be challenging for a teacher to teach a class to sing a song in unison if all of the children are at different stages of vocal development. (Welch) Singing a song is a complex task that requires a number of skills. Group improvisation, on the other hand, provides a place for every voice, even for those who never moved beyond the first or second stage of vocal pitch-matching development. For example: singing an ostinato, repeated phrase, to create or enhance a groove, expanding one's vocal range by sliding the voice up and down against a drone; or, being offered the opportunity to offer a pitch for others to mirror gives everyone, regardless of their level of singing experience, a chance to share their voice with others. In an environment where there are no wrong notes, or pre-defined musical expectations, a sensitive facilitator can help people develop the skills that they will eventually use to sing songs. In my vocal workshops, I have witnessed people beam when they suddenly find themselves spontaneously belting out a hook of a favorite tune. Sensorymotor mismapping is the inability to accurately imitate what is perceived. More specifically, one has trouble differentiating between timbre and pitch and is unable to reproduce the sound one hears. (Hutchins & Peretz) I believe this phenomenon has been caused in large part by our reverence for the recording industry. We choose not to sing because we can't compete with the enhanced "air-brushed" voices of our favorite artists' studio recordings. There is also an inseparable link between the signature vocal timbre of a recording artist and his/her hit song. For example, when one thinks of the songs "Billy Jean", "Papa's got a brand new Bag" or "Cry Baby", one will instantly hear the voices of Michael Jackson, James Brown and Janis Joplin. These factors can have a tremendous effect on how we might intuitively go about singing a hook from one of those songs. Often when trying to reproduce a desired sound, we unknowingly interfere with the delicate and complex actions inside the larynx that are responsible for accurate pitch production. Having a musical voice can feel like an impossible feat when we first try to imitate a sound in an untreated acoustic environment such as a classroom or backyard. Many people give up singing because they are unable to comfortably meet what they believe should be a good sound, which is in fact a conception of a polished commercial recording perceived from a third person perspective. To meet this kind of expectation is an impossible feat without a professional acoustic setting or electronic amplification. It is important to know that when we sing, we do not hear ourselves the way the rest of the world hears us (think of how shocked you are when you first hear a recording of your voice). For this reason, vocal improvisation in a very live acoustic environment such as in a large hallway or in the shower is a rewarding way to explore your voice, because you can hear it more easily as it reverberates.

Learning how to sing is particularly challenging because we are unable to see or feel the instrument we are playing, the vibrating source of which is the larynx. The larynx sits directly on top of the trachea and its primary function is to protect the airway. Inside the larynx is a complex system of muscles that can produce varying pitches - over which we have absolutely no direct control. Our two vocal folds (vocal cords) are about the length of our pinkie fingernail and are controlled by musical thought. Through imitation, we subconsciously learned to use this instrument in tandem with our mouth, tongue, lips and jaw to articulate speech sounds. I believe as we improvise, we can learn to sing in the same gradual way that we intuitively learned to speak.

We all possess the ability to sing. Let go of expectation, and get to know the voice you have. Start with a note that comes to you naturally, master that note. Find it on your instrument and create a drone. Slide/siren your voice up and come back to that note, then slide your voice downwards and come back to the note. Try another note that comes to you, and slide your voice up and down again. Slide a little at a time, you will gradually be able to slide farther away and find your way back. Try different vowels, and combinations of notes, create your own little tune, repeat it lovingly, like a

mantra, you will find it very relaxing. Find a resonant space to vocalize in, accept and love the voice you have right now, listen, define your intention, and sing one quality sound after another. Babble, or repeat a word, and discover rhythm. Play with words and discover accents. Imitate instruments. When singing with others, listen to how your voice reacts with the other notes, if it seems out of place, slide very slowly upwards or downwards and listen to the effect. Follow your desire to resonate with others. Watch and observe how experienced vocalists sing and try to sense what they are doing. If we compare singing to recreational sports, we don't need to be pro athletes to enjoy the benefits of playing a pickup game of soccer or baseball. With this in mind, let's turn off our stereos and sing a different tune!

Sources:

Hutchins, Sean Michael & Isabelle Peretz (2012) excerpt from, A frog in your throat or in your ear? Searching for the causes of poor singing, in *Journal Of Experimental Psychology: General*, 141(1): 76-97

Welch, Graham F. (2006) Singing and Vocal Development, in G. E. McPherson (ed.) *The Child as Musician: A Handbook of Musical Development*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press: 311-329

A Mentor in the Musician Leadership Program at Music for People, Irene Feher (D.Mus Vocal Pedagogy and Performance) teaches singing classes at McGill and Concordia University, and gives group workshops for singers of all levels called "Eusing!"

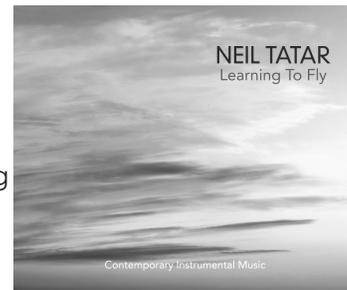
## CD Corner with Lynn Miller

We are so fortunate to have so many amazing musicians in our community. It is always exciting when a new CD emerges. Creating a CD is truly a transformative process.

### **Learning to Fly**

Neil Tatar, guitarist/pianist, is a graduate of the Music for People *Musicianship and Leadership Program* who currently serves as Music for People's board president. In his new CD *Learning to Fly*, Neil "winged in" inspiration from memories of life experiences, meaningful moments and changes that shaped his world. Each composition came from the heart expressing personal life stories. He wrote 9 compositions of smooth gliding music with jazzy colors on the piano and guitar.

Neil also spread his wings by orchestrating and leading some of the world's finest musicians into the compositions. Neil was joined by Paul Winter Consort member Eugene Friesen on cello, Jill Haley on English horn, and bassist Tony Levin, who has performed with Peter Gabriel and King Crimson. Noah Wilding added ethereal voice and Premik Rusell Tubbs, soprano sax, has performed with Carlos Santana and John McLaughlin. Other musicians include: Jeff Haynes, percussion, Charles Bisharat, violin, Michael Manning, bass and Grammy award winning guitarist, Will Ackerman.



How did *Learning to Fly* take flight? After Neil's first award winning CD, *Where Did the Time Go* (2013), with cellist David Darling, Neil contacted Will Ackerman, guitarist and founder of Windham Hill Records. Will expressed immediate interest in Neil's composing and playing after listening to his CD, and they subsequently had some email exchanges and phone calls before they met face to face. They both felt a strong creative connection, and the evolution of a CD evolved. During the process, Will had high standards and expectations, yet was completely supportive. Working along with Tom Eaton, the highly acclaimed sound engineer at Will's Imaginary Road Studios, they produced "Learning To Fly". The recording process was demanding and highly detailed but the results were well worth the effort. Neil wrote and arranged his music to include 9 different instrumentalists on the album.

The theme of *Learning to Fly*, portrayed beautifully through the music, is about coming to a new turn in the journey of life. Neil has aviated that turn, flown from the roost and is now soaring through this magnificent CD.

Lynn Miller is a music therapist and staff member for Music for People. [www.Spiritarts.us](http://www.Spiritarts.us)

## Interview with Jane Buttars, June 2015

**Smith:** Do you find any challenges to participating in Music for People?

**Buttars:** In the beginning the big challenge was just having the courage to participate. And it wasn't the group... the group was wonderful. But I think it's hard for a lot of people to let go and not be critical. It's hard to accept the basic premises of Music for People, which are wonderful. We are so trained to put ourselves in little boxes, "you can be this, and I can't be that." When I went to my first workshop, I was a trained pianist, but I also sang. I sang for years in choirs and so forth, and I also danced. But I thought of myself as a pianist, and that was it. I couldn't even sing, you know. Well, at Music for People you are asked to express yourself in any way you can. And I noticed that people were picking up different instruments. They were picking up shakers and things like that. And they were singing. And I thought, "oh, I can do that!" And so I ended up doing all of those things besides the keyboard and accepting that you are a musician first, and you are an instrumentalist second. You are a musician with a beautiful sound in your heart. And it comes out of your voice. I learned that I am defined as a musician and not as a keyboard player.



**Smith:** If you had to get at the essence of Music for People and encapsulate in into just a few words, what would those words be?

**Buttars:** Community, connection, inclusion, celebration, transformation, openness, and creativity... you get the message I guess.

Full interview transcripts are available upon request. Contact: [smithray14@ecu.edu](mailto:smithray14@ecu.edu)



Raychl Smith is Assistant Professor of Music Education at East Carolina University. Dr. Smith has previously served as Program Coordinator and Assistant Professor of Music Education at Minnesota State University Moorhead and Instructor of Music Education at Elon University. Prior to teaching at the collegiate level, she taught in the public schools of North Carolina as an elementary general music teacher, elementary choral director, and middle school band director. Dr. Smith has presented research at regional, state, and national conferences on Creative Motion pedagogy, innovative approaches to facilitating free improvisation, community music making, and music education and social justice.



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