



3-6-2012

When Words Fail, Music Speaks

Hannah Williams '12

Illinois Wesleyan University, hwilliam@iwu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/anth_ethno



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), and the [Music Performance Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Williams, Hannah '12, "When Words Fail, Music Speaks" (2012). *Outstanding Ethnographic Research Projects*. 7.

https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/anth_ethno/7

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by faculty in the Sociology & Anthropology Department at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

ILLINOIS WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY

When Words Fail, Music Speaks

A Visual Ethnographic Examination of Vocal
Performance Culture

Hannah Williams

3/6/2012

The Intro

Anyone who wanders by Illinois Wesleyan University's Evelyn Chapel on a Tuesday or Thursday afternoon will find their ears filled with the beautiful sounds of four part harmonies rising into the air. Although a passerby might question if this music is the result of a heavenly choir, the group responsible for such striking vocals is in fact very earthly. Those emanating this remarkable sound belong to the IWU Chamber Singers, a vocal performance ensemble comprised of eight individuals. To become a member, these students were selected from IWU choir auditions to participate in the Chamber Singers ensemble by Dr. Ferguson, the head of the vocal department in the IWU School of Music. All of the Chamber Singers have an immense passion for music, demonstrated by the fact that on average each member has been performing vocally in some context for ten years.



**ides an acoustically and
al area. The IWU Chamber
practice on Tuesdays and
!)**

These students are brought together by a love of music, specifically vocal performance, and it is this desire to perform that unites vocalists and permeates into every aspect of their lives. Vocal performers are distinctive due to the self-discipline that necessarily accompanies having one's voice be one's instrument, as all life choices directly affect a vocalist's ability to sing. Vocalists are also united by a strong feeling of self-confidence that is essential in a field that is highly competitive, subjective, and personal. Furthermore, while a love of music is a common theme for many musicians, vocal performers are distinguished by

both the emotional and physical connection that they must forge with their music.

Assumptions

Initially, going into this project I held the stereotypical image of the diva opera singer donning a horned Viking helmet and belting out a song on stage. Society and the media today have cast vocalists in a superficial light, portraying vocal performers as rather unintelligent divas. While I am familiar with vocal performance through my own experience in K-12 school choirs, I had limited knowledge of how having the identity of a singer affects so many other aspects of a person's life. Furthermore, I was largely unaware of the physical and emotional work that is required of serious vocal performers. Since vocal performance is such a popular field, there is a large amount of literature regarding different aspects of singing. One of the major areas of scholarship revolves around vocal health. As Welham and Maclagan (2003) describe, vocal fatigue is particularly important to singers because symptoms can negatively manifest in voice quality, control, and range. Bhavsar (2009) describes a variety of behaviors that are avoided by vocalists due to their negative effects on the voice, including smoking and drinking alcohol or caffeine.

Other major themes in the literature regard the role of the mind, body, and emotions in vocal performance. As Holding (2010) describes, "As all singers know, singing is both a mental and a physical effort-a total body sport" (p. 207). Vocal performance requires both physical and mental preparation. Furthermore, vocal performers must be also able to emotionally connect to their music, as emotional connections "will become the principal source of [their] success" (Austin, 2011, p.208). Additionally, vocalists must be able to recognize and alter physical behaviors that negatively impact their singing, while being conscious of how to protect their voices (Barefield, 2006).

Reviewing the literature allowed me to identify themes that have been

recognized by scholars as important in the field of vocal performance. My perception of the vocal performance community was shaped by a new awareness of the integral and holistic nature of vocal performance, as successful vocalists have to balance their mind, body, and emotions. I gained an increased awareness of the consequences that singers must face for mistreating their voices, realizing that the "diva" behaviors vocalists take part in are simply those that are necessary to preserve their voices.



le is
Here

Methodology

I was very eager to work with the vocal performance community at Illinois Wesleyan University due to my personal love and respect for all types of art. Despite my

lack of talent in the area, I have the utmost admiration for the art of vocal performance. To begin this project I met with Hanna Pristave, a senior vocal performance major, who later became my key consultant for this project. Over dinner I discussed with her the scope and aims of this project, and together we indentified the Chamber Singers as fitting ensemble to focus the project on. After we met, I contacted the other group members to introduce myself and explain the purpose and goals of the project. The following week, I attended an hour and a half long practice of the Chamber Singers, held in Evelyn Chapel on the IWU campus.

For the first rehearsal I left my camera at home and brought only my notebook and an open mind, so that I was able to observe the group and gain a better understanding of who they were and how they operate. During the first rehearsal that I

attended I had the pleasure of being "hazed" by the group, which was both a personally enjoyable experience and led to an increased comfort with the group. During one of the pieces, the group members pulled me up on stage while they encircled and sang directly to me. During the song I was able to feel each individual singer's voice resonating in a different part of my body, while I was also struck by the awesomeness of the song as a whole. I was able to



**hythmic exercise that
song. The use of
song is important
ed and blended**

physically and audibly experience the group as collection of distinct and individual voices, blending into an integrated and cohesive whole.

Over the next two weeks I attended two more rehearsals, which provided me with a better understanding of the relationships within the group. I was happily surprised to find informal, friendly, and fluid interactions within the group, which contradicted the rigid image of vocalists that is promoted by society. The Chamber Singers work as a unit, sharing ideas, compliments, and critiques. Instead of being individual "divas", everyone left inflexibility at the door and was open and receptive to new ideas. Through discussions with the group, I worked to collaboratively identify activities and behaviors that the group felt needed to be documented photographically, such as warm-ups and practice exercises

In addition to attending group rehearsals, I interviewed two members of Chamber Singers, Hanna Pristave and Joe Muriello, who were selected by their eagerness and willingness to take a larger part in this project. I asked both a series of open ended questions, designed to allow them to direct the conversation. This ensured that information obtained was based on their own thoughts and not an agenda created by me. I allowed each of my consultants to select the location for the interview, so that they would feel comfortable and open to our discussion. I interviewed Hanna twice in the Hansen Student Center, with each interview lasting approximately 45 minutes. My interview with Joe lasted two hours and took place at Mugsy's Pub,



**dual vocalists
understanding of
Hanna Pristave
performers prepare
(b. 2012)**

which created a relaxed and informal setting for our conversation.

These interviews provided me with a better understanding of how

vocalists perceive themselves, and the information gained through these interviews assisted me in framing the questions for the survey that I distributed to the entire group during a rehearsal. This survey allowed everyone to provide information about practice behaviors, the effects of vocal performance on their lives, and their views on the defining characteristics of the vocal performance community. This was useful so that I could ensure that every member of the group was being well-represented.

Furthermore, I discussed the use of photographs with my consultants, so that they could provide examples of what they felt should be visually represented in this essay. This collaboration ensured that my photographs accurately represented the vocal performance community as they viewed themselves, while identifying aspects that they deemed as important. Accurately representing my community is extremely important, which led me to review my notes after each interview session so that my consultants could elaborate on key points and correct anything that they felt had been misinterpreted or misconstrued.

Hanna and Joe were additionally able to direct me to other people and events that contributed to my understanding of vocalists. I interviewed Dr. Carren Moham, a professor and vocal coach at Illinois Wesleyan University. This meeting lasted for 45 minutes and was held in Dr. Moham's office. This interview provided me with two different perspectives: that of a professional vocal performer and that of a professor and vocal coach. Through my discussion with her I gained a better understanding of how she instructs students, and I was later able to observe an hour long voice lesson between her and a member of Chamber Singers. Observing this lesson gave me a firsthand examination of the techniques and strategies that are used to vocally coach students. I was also encouraged to attend two Master Classes during which Kyle Pfortmiller, a professional opera singer and IWU alumnus, worked with voice students on connecting emotionally to their pieces. Attending these classes contributed to a more balanced understanding on my part of vocal performance, as I was able to observe the technical aspects from Dr. Moham and the emotional aspects from Mr. Pfortmiller.

When I completed all of my interviews and observations, I met again with Hanna Pristave to discuss the direction of this essay and the selection of photographs. It was

extremely important to work collaboratively with members of my community to ensure that I was accurately representing their opinions and beliefs. Hanna assisted me in selecting the photographs for the essay, while providing information about the importance of the selected photographs. Together we decided on the aspects of the community to be highlighted in this essay, with additional input provided by the rest of the Chamber Singers ensemble to ensure that all members were comfortable with the scope of this essay.

Identifying the Verse

Through interviews, observation, and the use of a survey I was able to identify the key characteristics of the vocal performance community, in collaboration with members of the community. Discussions with members clearly identified self-discipline as a core characteristic that all vocal performers must necessarily share, as their instrument is their voice. My consultants explained that vocal performers must be extremely self-disciplined because all of their life choices have a direct impact on the quality of their vocal instrument. As Dr. Moham stated, "Your body is the instrument. Whatever your body goes through, your instrument goes through." Joe Muriello explained that though instrumentalists can purchase another instrument, vocalists can never get another voice or repair any severe damage. This means that vocalists must be extremely knowledgeable about vocal health and be exceptionally disciplined in their personal life choices.

As many of the community members described, vocal performers have to carefully control many aspects of their daily lives, as many things can negatively impact their ability to sing. Many vocalists follow a controlled diet before performances and restrict their intake of chocolate, citrus, dairy, and caffeine, as these substances can negatively affect a singer's voice. Good health is vital for success in vocal performance, so vocalists must ensure that they physically take care of their bodies and their vocal instrument. One of the Chamber Singers stated that being a vocal performer "keeps me accountable for my health a lot of times. I actually do a lot of separate things because I am a vocal performer."

This attitude was extremely common among the vocal performance community members. Vocalists are expected to take excellent care of their health, and this includes staying well rested and very well hydrated. Another member of Chamber Singers stated that as a vocalist, "You have to be more aware of your body because your body is your instrument. This includes sleeping more, going to bed earlier, and trying to eat healthier." Unlike many college students, vocalists must be disciplined in their sleep schedules, because adequate sleep is so vital for the function of their instrument. Vocalists must additionally be disciplined in their social life. Joe Muriello stated, "I have to constantly be mindful of what I'm doing and how it could affect my voice." For example, he described how he seldom goes to loud concerts or events, as conversing in these areas places a strain on his voice. Hanna agreed, explaining how it is common for vocalists to miss out on social opportunities because of the need to keep their voices healthy. Joe said that being a vocal performer "detracts from a lot of experiences that I could have because I have to be careful of how something that I am doing could damage my voice."

Furthermore, vocal performers have notoriously busy daily schedules, which means that personal free time is very limited. Additionally, a large amount of free time is taken up by outside rehearsal time. For example, on average each member of the Chamber Singers spends 7-8 hours outside of class in a practice room rehearsing. Practice rooms allow vocalists to practice their vocals and analyze their physical technique in a mirror, so that they are able to improve their vocal instrument. It is this type of discipline and commitment that is necessary for success, no matter the cost socially. However, the majority of vocalists are glad to apply such to discipline to their lives because it helps them to succeed in the field that holds their passion.

o be self-disciplined."
ier Hall allow vocalists to
rough the use of a mirror
Vocal performers often
re their limited free time.



The self-discipline that is necessary for success in vocal performance has strongly contributed to the image of vocalists as "divas". As Hanna described, "That amount of discipline comes off as rough or intimidating." However, self-discipline and self-confidence are necessary in a highly personal and competitive field, despite the fact that these characteristics often lead to the continuation of the "diva" image. Nonetheless, the "diva" image is not necessarily a bad thing to vocal performance community. As Dr. Moham described, "A lot of people call us high maintenance. I am a diva. It means that I am good at what I do." It is this self-confidence and self assurance that is necessary to succeed as a vocal performer.

Dr. Moham described how students must have a level of self-confidence that allows them to endure the constant criticism of a personal instrument that accompanies vocal performance. As she said, "You need to have some ego, because if you don't you're going to get beat down." Joe also described the importance of self-confidence, as singers will likely not be successful if they do not perceive themselves as good at what they do. Vocal performers face a life of constant rejection and critique, which makes self-confidence extremely important.



**vocal performers have a
idence, which allows
forming in front of an
Pristave takes advantage
Auditorium and
ence. (Photo Feb. 2012)**

Along with being confident in their abilities, vocal performers must forge an emotional and physical connection to their music. This physical connection comes from technique, which Dr. Moham heavily emphasized during the voice lesson that I observed. Proper technique, including correct breathing and posture is vital for success in vocal performance. Vocalists must physically feel their sound and how they are

producing it, so that they are able to analyze and correct their technique. Singers must also take a holistic view of their instrument. As Hanna described, "Our instrument is our voice, we have to do a lot of mind, body, and soul searching." Singers must physically perfect their instrument and train their bodies to respond to emotions.

Joe described how being a vocalist is the bridge between two different worlds: the world of music and the world of text. Vocalists must be technically aware of what they are doing, but they must also be aware of the textual meaning and connect to it emotionally. If a vocalist fails to connect emotionally to the piece, the experience

will feel hollow to the audience. Kyle Pfortmiller, an IWU alumnus and opera singer, also emphasized the importance of emotions in vocal performance in his two master classes. In these classes, he encouraged vocal students to be their music, instead of doing their musical pieces.

As he described to the students, "There is something that only you can tell as an artist." Vocal performers need to emotionally connect to their music, so that they are able to share a piece of themselves with the audience.



Moham. Vince
l technique.
t important
calist to correctly



songs."-
onal
de an
iust
:012)

Exploring the Chorus

The information that I have gained through this project supports the trends in the literature. Scholarly sources commonly focus on the health-related aspects of vocal performance, which are very foundational to vocalists. Vocalists take their health extremely seriously, since their body is their instrument. It is this self-consciousness and self-discipline that oftentimes creates the assumption that all vocal performers are "divas". However, I have found that vocal performers are typically extremely humble and open to learning. What are commonly construed as "diva" behaviors are in fact behavioral

mechanisms that allow vocalists to achieve success in their highly competitive field. Vocalists must be confident in their abilities, or else they run the risk of losing heart in a highly critical field. Furthermore, vocalists must take control over their own bodies and their lives because their body is what allows them to fulfill their passion for music.

My research also supported other key themes in the literature, such as the physical and emotional connection that vocalists form with their music. In my experience, both physical technique and emotional connection hold equal weight in vocal performance. Throughout my research, the information that I gained through interviews was independently supported by discussions with other group members. This lead me to the conclusion that both Joe Muriello and Hanna Pristave, my primary interviewees and consultants, represent typical members of the vocal performance community. Nearly everyone that I spoke to indentified the same characteristics as essential to the vocal performance community, mainly the need for self-discipline, the importance of self-confidence, and the

value of physically and emotionally connecting to their music. It seems that these characteristics are inherent to the vocal performance community, as they are developed in response to the pressures that all vocal performers face.

The Outro

The Illinois Wesleyan University Chamber Singers ensemble offers an interesting and enlightening look into the culture of the vocal performance community. Through my work with this exciting group, I was able to identify the key characteristics that distinguish this community of vocal performers from other communities. In the preliminary phases of this project I was grappling with the image of the diva opera singer wearing a horned Viking helmet, yet through this study I have been able to cast an illuminating light on the characteristics of vocal performance culture. Rather than a community of "divas", as they have been negatively stereotyped, I have found vocal performers to be responsive to the lifestyle changes that must accompany having one's voice be one's instrument. Vocal performers must live a disciplined life, both physically and emotionally, in order to ensure the health of their vocal instrument. Furthermore, they must have a level of self-confidence that allows them to thrive in a highly competitive and critical field. Vocalists are united by their shared love of music, and it is this passion that drives them to devote their minds, bodies, and souls to perfecting their instrument.

For vocal performers, the fact that they are a vocalist affects every other aspect of their lives. Dr. Moham perhaps captured the feeling of this community best when she said, "Singing is inherent, almost like breathing. You don't need to sing to live, but I do think that I need to sing to be happy." Clearly, vocal performance is both a physical and an extremely emotional lifestyle. Knowledge of this community could be furthered in the future with more research on the role of emotions in vocal performance. Many vocal performers will explain that "music is love" (Hanna Pristave). As long as there continues to be a passion and love for music, vocalists will continue to devote their hearts and bodies in the quest for perfection of the voice. Vocal performers, such as the IWU Chamber Singers, will continue to share the result of their dedication and discipline with the world through their song.

Works Cited

- Austin, S.F. (2011). A footnote to history. *Journal Of Singing*, 68(2), 207-209.
- Barefield, R. (2006). Self-analysis skills for the developing singer. *Music Educators Journal*, 92(3), 50-54.
- Bhavsar, V. (2009). An essay on the evidence base of vocal hygiene. *Journal Of Singing*, 65(3), 285-296
- Helding, L. (2010). Break a leg! The ironic effect, choking, and other mind games. *Journal Of Singing*, 67(2), 207-212.
- Welham, N., & Maclagan, M. (2003). Vocal fatigue: Current knowledge and future directions. *Journal Of Voice*, 17(1), 21-30.