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Helping Non-Singers Overcome Fear and Anxiety in Aural Skills

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INTRODUCTION

Many collegiate students arrive for music study with only ensemble experience, which rarely includes significant aural training. Additionally, some students who play non-classical instruments (e.g., guitar, drum set, etc.) may not even have ensemble training. Some students are underprepared for aural skills and often fall behind from the very beginning. Paula Telesco observes that,

When we ask underprepared students to read music notation (which they cannot do well) for the purpose of audiating, or hearing internally a musical pattern (which they cannot yet hear) so that they can sing it in rhythm (especially while conducting), we place an insurmountable barrier before them; many students give up before they have even begun.¹

Many students feel fear and anxiety upon entering the aural skills classroom and may have deficiencies relegating them to the bottom of the class or placing them in a fundamentals course. Students feel apprehension, making aural skills a feared class in the curriculum.

Underprepared students are not alone in these feelings. A recent survey at Appalachian State University polled 141 music majors regarding their preconceived ideas about theory and aural skills. The survey asked, "As a first-year student, what preconceived ideas did you or do you have about theory/aural skills classes?" Fifty-nine (41.8%) students answered the question with a negative response, forty (28.4%) had general fear

¹ Paula Telesco, "Teaching Elementary Aural Skills: How Current Brain Research May Help," *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* 27 (2013): 229.

or felt aural skills were difficult, and sixteen (11.3%) felt they lacked exposure or were underprepared.² Further comments reveal specific feelings regarding students' experience:

- I did not have a solid grasp of the concepts and was very frustrated by my lack of comprehension.
- Singing solfege the first day of class frightened me, and I thought it was going to be a lot easier than it is.
- I do not have a [theory] background. So, I kind of feel behind from everyone else. Thus, I feel stupid when I ask questions.

Many available sight-singing texts begin with a fair amount of assumed knowledge and spend little time addressing basic fundamentals. Telesco cites six commercially available aural skills texts, providing a glimpse of the materials instructors might use.³ Most commercially available texts offer little help for non-singers. Some offer metaphors (e.g., "hearing eye")⁴ while others attempt to start from scratch, though still assume numerous competencies that may be lacking in non-singers approaching the subject for the first time. None of the texts directly address the common impediments to success commonly experienced by non-singers. The lack of information addressing non-singing

² Undergraduate Core Survey, <https://www.surveymonkey.com/results/SM-2T8JTZP2/> (accessed September 7, 2015).

³ Telesco, 212. Thomas Benjamin, Michael Horvit, and Robert Nelson, *Music for Sight Singing*, 6th ed. (Boston: Schirmer Cengage Learning, 2012); Bruce Benward and Maureen A. Carr, *Sightsinging Complete*, 7th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007); Sol Berkowitz et al., *A New Approach to Sight Singing*, 5th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010); Nancy Rogers and Robert W. Ottman, *Music for Sight Singing*, 9th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2014); Gary S. Karpinski and Richard Kram, *Anthology for Sight Singing*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007); Joel Phillips et al., *The Musicians Guide to Aural Skills* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011).

⁴ Benward and Carr, xi.

students only exacerbates students' fears. This paper examines environmental fears and technical challenges non-singing students face and provides techniques instructors can implement within a fundamentals course, first-semester aural skills course, or with individual students.

FEARS AND INABILITIES

Environmental Anxiety

Students' self-imposed expectations can produce apprehension and performance anxiety. Lehrer discusses the effect of competing against "superstars," or those perceived as advanced, actually inhibit performance. Students lose motivation to succeed when they perceive that they are competing against superior students. In addition, there is an increased focus on personal actions, causing students to choke under added pressure.⁵ Underprepared students placed in a remedial class or at the bottom of a first-semester course feel this pressure with greater intensity because they may feel that every student's ability is superior to their own. The crux of this emotion is the feeling that individuals are separated from the rest of the group and isolated in their problems.

Students may succumb to a negative cyclical pattern whenever they fear being singled out and judged by peers they perceive to be superior; they think they cannot sing well and therefore do not sing well.⁶ This cycle reaffirms students' fears and engrains a fixed mindset. Bledsoe and Baskin note,

⁵ Jonah Lehrer, "Essay: The Superstar Effect," *Wall Street Journal*, April 3, 2010, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303960604575158122511930684> (accessed September 1, 2015).

⁶ Marty Heresniak, "The Care and Training of Adult *Bluebirds* (Teaching the Singing Impaired)," *Journal of Singing* 61, no. 1 (September/October 2004): 20.

When students with fixed mindsets make low grades on tests, they may react with fear-based self-talk. They may internalize blame (“I knew it. This proves I’m a failure”) or fault others (“The professor really had it in for me”) without being able to realistically assess the situation (“I did not receive the grade I wanted on this test. I will incorporate new study strategies for the next one.”)⁷

It is difficult to break this cycle because students’ anxieties are reinforced, causing students to fall below their potential.

Specific Singing Challenges

Underprepared students are neither new nor unique. “For many college-level musicians, however, a class in aural skills might present the first time in their musical training they are called upon to sing.”⁸ Karpinski goes on to quote Hindemith lamenting the same trend in 1949. “It is quite common to find excellent instrumentalists (not to mention composers) who have gone through six or more years of practical and theoretical studies without ever having opened their mouths for the most natural of all musical utterances!”⁹

Non-singing students face a unique set of challenges other students may not encounter such as pitch and rhythmic solmization, hand signs, etc. Beyond these learning strategies, Heresniak lists several deficiency categories encountered in his research with the singing impaired. These challenges often work in combination and to varying degrees. Heresniak’s classifications help professors locate deficient students and provide a framework for diagnosis. These include:

⁷ Scott T. Bledsoe and Janice J. Baskin, “Recognizing Student Fear: The Elephant in the Classroom,” *College Teaching* 62 no. 1 (Winter 2014): 35.

⁸ Gary S. Karpinski, *Aural Skills Acquisition: The Development of Listening, Reading, and Performing Skills in College-Level Musicians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 145.

⁹ Paul Hindemith, *Elementary Training for Musicians*, 2nd ed. (New York: Associated Music Publishers, 1949), xi.

- Octave clouding (unable to match pitch in the same octave)
- Poor Aural Acuity (the ability to hear large intervals and comparisons of high and low but unable to distinguish smaller intervals)
- Singing Virgins (those who have never sung in a formal setting)
- Memory Deficit (may be able to match a few pitches but is unable to group larger melodic structures together)
- Mapless (can recognize pitch direction but is unable to discern the distance, often guessing at intervals)
- Key Morphs (singers frequently change keys within a melody to avoid the perceived extreme range).¹⁰

PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS

I have observed several indications and patterns of apprehensive students. Students who are apprehensive about singing will often physically move themselves in an attempt to hide from the instructor or other students. This physical movement is seen when students hide at the back of class, physically close their body posture, or distance themselves from other students.

Students who are fearful about making mistakes or their singing voice may attempt to aurally hide from the class by not singing in a full voice. They will often sing very softly, relying on stronger singers to take control. At times I have been able to whisper louder than an entire class sings. This practice harms students because they are not able to learn from their errors and do not grow as quickly as they could.

¹⁰ Heresniak, 12–18.

When students are put on the spot either in front of class or in a sight-singing quiz, they may experience a complete shutdown. During assessment, some students may refuse to complete parts of an exam, negotiating their grade if only a portion of the exam is completed. Many would rather receive a poor grade than even try to make a singing sound. These students even attempt to avoid sight-singing quizzes altogether by dropping courses just before the first quiz. They often sign up multiple times for a course only to withdraw, regardless of their grade.

SOLUTIONS

Professors can help reduce anxiety through creative techniques that are easy to implement and provide support for the entire class. The solutions offered here address classroom atmosphere, assessment, and techniques for moving from speech to singing.

Classroom Atmosphere

The course's tone is often set early in the semester. Many times students enter aural skills with apprehension and uncertainty. Instructors can calm students' anxieties with a few simple steps. Pan and Tang find a simple orientation letter before class begins can alleviate students' fears about a new subject.¹¹ Bledsoe and Baskin extend the idea of an orientation letter to include frequent and encouraging communication outside of class.¹² The communication could be positive email messages or individual conferences. This step assures students that professors care about their success and are available. It also

¹¹ Wei Pan and Mei Tang, "Students' Perceptions on Factors of Statistics Anxiety and Instructional Strategies," *Journal of Instructional Psychology* 32, no. 3 (September 2005): 209.

¹² Bledsoe and Baskin, 38.

discourages feelings that they are invisible to the professor and can therefore hide during class during a singing activity.

Professors help students conquer their fears by creating a classroom environment where students realize they are not alone in their feeling. Foss and Reitzel note,

The teacher can begin by presenting the idea that we all operate, to some extent, from individual irrational belief systems...Following this discussion, the instructor asks students to generate a list of their fears about speaking the new language. Simply putting these on the board and allowing students to realize that they are not alone in their fears can, in and of itself, encourage students to relax in their efforts to speak the second language.¹³

Professors can then discuss these fears with students and find evidences for or against them.¹⁴ In addition to helping students rationalize their classroom fear, instructors can provide frequent stress reducing activities, fear management and relaxation techniques, and even a good dose of humor.¹⁵ These steps signal to students that the classroom is a safe place to make mistakes, music, and have fun.

Creating a class environment where students feel comfortable can be accomplished through humor and “game” activities. I often discuss and even joke about the fears and mistakes I encountered during my training. This reassures students that they are not alone in their feelings and we are often able to find humor in my experiences. I usually follow this with strategies of how to overcome these mistakes. I also use game-like challenges where students understand they are not evaluated and may not even complete the task. The class might attempt to sing an example while doing a number of other requirements (e.g.,

¹³ Foss, Karen A. Foss and Armeda C. Reitzel, “A Relational Model for Managing Second Language Anxiety,” *TESOL Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (September 1988): 445.

¹⁴ Foss and Reitzel, 446.

¹⁵ Bledsoe and Baskin, 37–38.

conducting with one hand, using hand signs with the other, and tapping their foot to beat divisions) or hocket a melody with groups assigned to specific scale degrees or a particular beat within a measure. The paradox with these exercises is that when students face a difficult challenge, the fear of failure is often removed and they may do better than they expect. These challenges also make the class more enjoyable and much more active.

Evaluation

Professors' attitudes regarding evaluation have an impact on students' fear and anxiety. Young finds that when professors correct errors in a non-confrontational manner, they take the role of facilitator and can reduce student anxiety.¹⁶ Professors may also aid students by, for a short time, withholding evaluation. Pan and Tang found that, "the participants indicated that fear of failure was one of the causes of anxiety. Therefore, if instructors can eliminate the sources for their failure (i.e., examination), students at least can focus more on learning rather than outcome evaluation."¹⁷ Students need to learn that incorrect responses are learning opportunities and how to take preemptive steps in the future.

Student self-evaluation and working in groups removes the authoritarian role and promotes peer-based learning. I accomplish this through class singing and class evaluation. After the class has sung an example they will discuss the parts that were not perfect focusing on why specific mistakes were made. "Was it a difficult leap?" "A particular rhythm?" "A reading error?" The class then discusses how to avoid these problems in future

¹⁶ Dolly Jesusita Young, "Creating a Low-Anxiety Classroom Environment: What Does Language Anxiety Research Suggest?" *Modern Language Journal* 75, no. 4 (1991): 431.

¹⁷ Pan and Tang, 211.

sight-singing examples and how to identify trouble spots before we sing. This class discussion fortifies standards and elements of assessment.

I also have the class work in groups, completing harmonic and melodic dictation on the board. This practice helps students learn from others and see how their peers solve problems. Students will often debate parts of the dictation in effort to determine the correct answer. The group work at the board allows me to quickly see who needs more aid without students feeling singled out in front of the class.

Instructors remove additional anxieties by ensuring students are familiar with testing formats. Dykeman found that “multiple, non-graded tests to develop familiarity with testing format and response options” help lessen students’ fears.¹⁸ When students practice sight singing and dictation in the exact format as graded quizzes, many formatting issues are removed. I have found that students appreciate knowing exactly the type of material that will be on a quiz. Students are able to focus on singing instead of deciphering the quiz’s format.

Singing

Faculty initiated strategies may help underprepared students quickly acclimate to aural skills. Students’ first steps in overcoming a fear of singing is to realize that singing is essentially pitched speaking. Ware suggests techniques to move students from speaking to singing. Professors can implement these ideas via a three-step process in as little as one to two class sessions.

¹⁸ Bruce Dykeman, “Statistics Anxiety: Antecedents and Instructional Interventions,” *Education* 132, no. 2 (Winter 2011): 445.

1. Check students uninhibited pitch range by crying, yawning, and making various speech-sounds. Locate the pitch of students' normal speaking voice, and experiment with slightly raising or lowering the pitch of the normal speaking voice.¹⁹
2. Experiment with different types of extreme speech. Have students repeat a phrase impersonating a crazy, drunk, tired, etc. person.²⁰ This allows students to explore their voice with a bit of levity. They also learn vocal control without the perceived pressure of singing.
3. Speak in a *recitative* or *Sprechstimme* technique focusing on holding a single pitch throughout a phrase.²¹ The professor can change pitches for different phrases or within a single phrase.

Once students have become comfortable with moving from speech to singing, professors can begin matching pitches. Professors can have students use lip trills or kazoos if they are still reluctant singers. It is important to note that aural skills instructors need a formulaic process when practicing pitch matching. Creating a set routine can equip students to continue the same routine during their practice time. Students need adequate time to hear and audiate the pitch. If the professor does not give students enough time to hear the pitch, there will be intonation errors.²² Once students have heard and audiated the pitch, they can slowly glissando into the played pitch. Professors should encourage

¹⁹ Clifton Ware, *Adventures in Singing: A Process for Exploring, Discovering, and Developing Vocal Potential*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008), 9–10.

²⁰ Ware, 10.

²¹ Ware, 11.

²² Robert E. Nye et al., *Music in the Elementary School*, 6th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992), 245–246.

students to listen and notice when they arrive at the correct pitch. Students can also experiment by intentionally singing out of tune. Once students arrive at the requested pitch, glissando slightly above or below the pitch. These exercises teach vocal-control, intonation, and remove the pressure of singing correct pitches.

Upon mastering singing back single pitches professors can add pitches by echoing tonal patterns.²³ Students grasp tonal relationships without the initial addition of reading notated music while practicing these echo exercises. The appendix contains a number of pitch patterns I use as echo exercises. These examples are shown with stemless notes and in the key of C major. I usually sing the first few notes of the pattern and have students echo it back. Once students learn the pattern, they continue it throughout the scale and helps strengthen the scale and tonal relationships. I encourage students to create different rhythmic patters for each as well as new tonal patterns to teach the class. These patterns are only a sampling of the possibilities and it is important for students to learn how to create and practice new patterns.

Even with a methodical approach as described above, some students may still have difficulty singing and matching pitch. Professors can meet individually with such students regarding specific deficiencies. Heresniak provides a test for assessing students' pitch matching abilities.²⁴ This test helps diagnose students and places them in categories based upon the results. Following the test, professors should have adequate information to suggest further steps.

²³ Alan C. McClung, *Movable Tonic: A Sequenced Sight-Singing Method*, Teacher's ed. (Chicago: GIA Publication, Inc., 2008), 3–6.

²⁴ Heresniak, 22–23.

I have found that using this three-step process helps students feel relaxed because each step appears basic and they naturally progress from one to the next. I have seen students who began very unsure with their singing voice gain confidence and become strong sight singers. When my students have felt comfortable singing and making mistakes, they practice more because the fear of singing has been removed, thereby reversing the negative cycle of fear-based withdrawal described earlier.

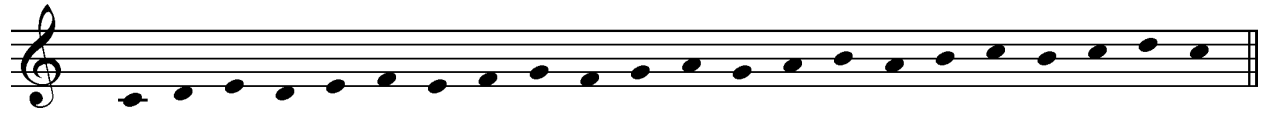
CONCLUSION

Students may feel anxious and fearful entering higher education, and aural skills often only exacerbates these feelings. Non-singing students have added fear because they have never used their singing voices and may have deficiencies, making them less prepared than other students. The trepidation students feel can be minimized through professor intervention. Students need a safe learning environment where they can make and learn from their mistakes. The classroom should be enjoyable and focused on learning and improving skills. Professors facilitate learning, ensure comprehension, and comfort non-singers when material is presented at a deliberate pace. With work and care professors will create an aural skills class full of enjoyment and learning.

APPENDIX

Tonal Patterns

1.



2.



3.



4.

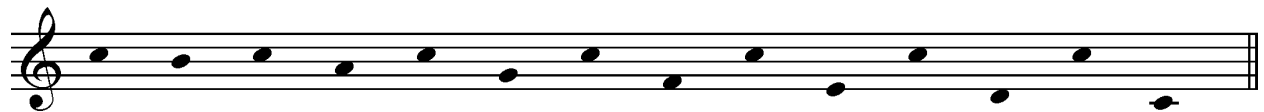
cont.



5.



6.



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