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Module 4

BMPF7073D: Independent Study Module (Extended)

'Use of Vocal Expression of Emotion techniques to overcome performance inhibitions in adolescents: a review and a tiered approach.'

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Component 1

Word count: 1474 words

Introduction

In my work as a one-to-one singing teacher of Contemporary and Commercial Music in secondary schools, dealing with adolescents' performance inhibitions and even reluctance to sing is commonplace. After all, adolescence is a time of intense physical and psychological changes that have been found to directly impact individuals' enjoyment of singing, often resulting in timid performances or students quitting it altogether (Freer, 2015; Sweet, 2015; Orton and Pitts, 2019).

As I always felt ill-equipped supporting my learners in staying engaged through these challenges, I would like to address this gap in my knowledge. While interventions based on self-compassion and Acceptance and Commitment Coaching (ACC) have been explored in the literature (Broomhead, Skidmore and Eggett, 2010; Broomhead et al, 2012; Kinney et al, 2025), they may not be practical in all teaching contexts. I was therefore inspired by Xu's (2025) suggestion of redirecting performers' focus to something other than internal difficulties and would like to propose work on Vocal Expression of Emotion (VEE) as a possible procedure for this. VEE not only involves an external focus of attention (Brand, 2021), but also comprises the artistic and aesthetic aspects so fundamental in music-making and singing (Bennet, 2013; Ekici, 2022; Woody et al, 2024), which may be compromised if vocalists are merely focusing on getting the technical basics of pitch, rhythm, and phonation right. This paper will, therefore, examine whether VEE could be a viable way to support inhibited adolescent singers and enliven their performances.

Planned Programme of Study

Context

The topic of challenges in adolescence is regularly written about, as dictated by a rapidly changing world influencing how the youngest perceive and react to ever-evolving circumstances (Stevens, 2024). Similarly, voice science closely examines how hormonal changes, as well as other psychosocial factors, impact young people's enjoyment of singing (Sweet, 2015; Orton and Pitts, 2019; Anderson, 2024; Xu, 2025). On a different realm, VEE is also extensively studied in scholarly literature, although empirical studies are still relatively scarce (Scherer et al, 2015; Scherer, 2021). Additionally, most include fewer than 50 participants, a small sample compared, for example, with studies about adolescence that frequently gather accounts from hundreds of people. This means that, inevitably, such studies yield limited generalisability of their findings and proposed strategies, despite providing rich qualitative data.

While literature about VEE is predominantly devoted to studying professional or semi-professional performers, including singers and actors, some researchers have focused on adolescent musicians (Ebie, 2004; Broomhead et al, 2012; Maas, 2021; Meissner, 2021). They presented valuable contributions that consider developmental challenges faced by this population, such as vocal changes and their psychosocial environment. Additionally, these studies uncovered some fascinating strategies for teaching VEE, ranging from lyrics-focused work (Meissner, 2021; Maas, 2021) to movement-based techniques (Juntunen, Arlin and Liira, 2023). However, studies do not fully explore the reasons why expressiveness work with adolescents can be challenging, nor question whether their proposed approaches could be suitable for particularly timid or reluctant students. Additionally, such papers frequently conflate instrumentalists and vocalists, overlooking specific challenges faced by singers.

It is therefore my intention to examine possible factors holding adolescent singers back and understand whether suggested VEE approaches could support them and why. The process to achieve this will be outlined below.

Aims, Objectives, and Expected Learning Outcomes

My **aims** for this paper are:

- Enhance my awareness of challenges faced by adolescent singers
- Learn about different pedagogical approaches to VEE
- Critically analyse their feasibility in singing lessons with adolescents in general by contemplating factors such as their complexity, abstractness, or their propensity to be perceived as embarrassing, with particular consideration for students who feel uncomfortable performing
- Propose a tiered approach to VEE work

To accomplish this, the following **objectives** were set:

- Carry out a search of peer-reviewed literature about the different reasons that could cause performance inhibition in adolescents to further inform strategies. This will include searches in journals related to voice pedagogy and science, but also those devoted to psychology and social sciences
- Analyse literature about VEE
- Collect and analyse different pedagogical strategies to teach VEE
- Identify and scrutinise those that I deem appropriate to support adolescents and why
- Consider different types of students and exercises to help create the tiers
- Assign collected pedagogical strategies to each tier

My Expected Learning Outcomes are:

- Improve my understanding of literature review methodology and learn more about how to implement it
- Continue developing my authorial voice through engagement with meta discourse (Hyland, 2017)
- Refine my approach to searching and selecting literature, increasing academic efficiency and honesty
- Raise my awareness about the challenges adolescent singers face and why
- Learn VEE strategies that I may be able to implement in my practice

Timescales and review dates

Time management will be an important endeavour throughout the assignment to ensure that all tasks are completed within the required timeframe (Grix, 2001). The GANTT chart below (Fig. 1) outlines, as recommended by Blaxter, Hughes and Tight (2006), all the key activities to be undertaken throughout the approximately five months of the duration of this project, with two dates to review progress.

Fig. 1: Project timeline

Month	February	March	April	May	June
Refine research question					
Literature-based research					
Write Component 1					
Define themes for Component 2					
Write literature review					
Write conclusion					
Write critical reflection					
Send draft					
Finalise manuscript after draft feedback					
Review progress on the 15th of the month					

Methodology

A rapid scoping review style was initially considered for this literature review due to its systematic and methodical nature, which would allow me to consider the current range of literature on my topic with the aim of identifying and evaluating gaps in knowledge (Winter,

2023). Nevertheless, the apparent fluidity of the narrative review methodology leads me to consider it useful for my intentions to synthesise studies and link them between each other to potentially generate new theories or ideas (Baumeister and Leary, 1997; Green, Johnson and Adams, 2006) and address some practical implications for my teaching. Considering my objective of creating a plausible system to teach VEE in my professional context by linking theory and practice, a pragmatist approach (Winter, 2021) and a narrative review-style appear to be most suitable for my needs and will therefore be adopted.

To collect the required literature to review, I shall use the University of Wales Trinity Saint David library search engine, as well as Google Scholar to access any additional material. The following search terms are to be used:

- Adolescence AND singing
- Adolescence AND self-consciousness OR embarrassment
- Vocal expression of emotion AND singing
- Singing AND movement

After an initial collection of peer-reviewed literature is completed, I will forward and backward-chain the most relevant articles I find. Some separate searches will be conducted to locate literature about specific authors and practitioners, such as Chekhov, Laban, or Dalcroze.

Since this study covers the seemingly distinct topics of singing in adolescence and VEE, I will use Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method to code literature into these broad themes and create sub-themes for more focused categorisation. This means that literature about adolescence and VEE will require different inclusion and exclusion criteria each because, while VEE is a theme finding value in both current and older literature (as it occasionally draws from decades-old performance techniques), adolescence is a topic of much faster development, particularly considering the recent COVID pandemic, which inevitably impacted younger people and warrants for more current perspectives and information. Inclusion and exclusion criteria for each broad topic will be informed by Meline's (2006) framework and are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Inclusion criteria for peer-reviewed literature.

	Challenges of Adolescence	Reasoning		VEE	Reasoning
Time period	Past 15 years	Preference for literature from the past		From 1970 onwards	It is an area of research that partly draws on and is

		decade. However, some core articles were written before 2015, making expansion necessary.			developed from decades-old theories and practices, particularly when acting and dancing techniques are involved
Study population	Adolescents must be included in the studied sample.	Other populations would be irrelevant.		Actors and singers of any genre and age. Literature exclusively dedicated to instrumental musicians was excluded.	There is limited VEE literature studying solo CCM performers, making it necessary to include broad criteria for populations. However, there is enough information available to warrant the search to be limited to vocalists.
Methodology	Qualitative and/or quantitative.	From a pragmatic point of view, I value qualitative and quantitative data, as well as literature reviews.		Qualitative and/or quantitative.	From a pragmatic point of view, I value qualitative and quantitative data, as well as literature reviews.

Justification of specific sources

This paper prioritises peer-reviewed literature due to the editorial rigour that can be expected from scholarly journals, which I regard as reliable sources of information. However, as Adams, Smart and Huff's (2016) taxonomy of grey literature's credibility places books on the highest tier in terms of trustworthiness, I shall also cite specific ones that informed the subsequent development of VEE methods and theories outlined in white literature. Despite

their being decades old, these books provide valuable insights, supplementary information, and context for these methods, while also having undergone an editorial process.

Component 2

Word count: 6766

Introduction

Singing presents many benefits for an individual's life. However, it is also well-known that it can be intimidating and exposing, with adolescents potentially being particularly vulnerable to negative experiences affecting their wish to perform (Freer, 2015; Sweet, 2015). While promising interventions for these challenges have been studied, including ACC and self-compassion routines (Broomhead, Skidmore and Eggett, 2010; Broomhead et al, 2012; Kinney et al, 2025), this paper's aim is to propose and study how VEE could be another way to support self-conscious adolescent singers.

Following the methodologies outlined in Component 1, I shall start by examining the different circumstances potentially causing performance inhibitions and anxieties in adolescents. Following this section, a broad exploration of different approaches to VEE suggested throughout the literature will be carried out, with consideration given to their suitability for self-conscious students. This will lead to the creation of a Tiered System categorising exercises according to their feasibility with different types of students.

Singing and adolescent self-consciousness

Adolescence is a time of intense change that may impact different aspects of young people's lives, be it physically, emotionally, or socially. My own anecdotal observations in the workplace attest to the belief that, for this age group, singing can be as much a source of enjoyment as of anxious and unpleasant feelings.

While students quitting singing can often be an issue (Freer, 2015), it is not something I have anecdotally experienced, as singing lessons are mandatory in my secondary schools' curriculum. For this reason, motivation to carry on singing will fall out of the scope of this study. Nevertheless, engagement and enjoyment are still relevant, and it is important to acknowledge factors turning singing into a challenging activity for many adolescents. Through an inductive thematic analysis of recent literature, the following sub-themes were generated to potentially explain these vulnerabilities: **consequences of vocal changes** and **psychosocial circumstances**. They will be examined in the next few pages.

Consequences of vocal changes

It is known that puberty and the onset of sexual hormones have a direct impact on the adolescent voice. This includes the deepening of vocal range due to growth of vocal folds and vocal tract (Zamponi et al, 2021), or excessive breathiness in females caused by laryngeal growth (Sweet, 2015). Although for many decades the focus of scholarly interest

was mostly directed at more obvious vocal changes occurring in males (Sweet, 2015), recent research has also focused on female voices and compared both sexes, helping clarify and validate what most adolescents face during this time as vocalists.

A worthy example of this is Orton and Pitts' (2019) mixed-methods study comparing the singing experiences of 92 girls and 100 boys. Results showed that participants generally reported a lack of confidence in their singing, leading to a dislike for their voice after puberty. Boys described inhibitions about singing for an audience for this reason, which is concurrent with Freer's (2015) reports of boys describing their voices as "damaged" (p. 97). Similarly, Sweet (2015, 2018) found that female adolescent singers experienced feelings "from fear and humiliation to frustration and embarrassment" (p. 80), circumstances equivalent to those reported in studies with male subjects. Concerns appeared to be connected, amongst other factors, to vocal changes and a lack of understanding about them, making singers perform timidly in the presence of others (Sweet, 2015). I believe this knowledge to be crucial to understanding why adolescents may face performance inhibitions when singing.

This leads into the idea of singers' self-efficacy, or how good they perceive their singing to be which, as studies outlined above suggest, is something adolescents are constantly evaluating. Xu (2025) sought to understand what might negatively impact adolescent singers' self-efficacy and found physiological factors outside of their control to be the only determinant variable. Although the quantitative nature of that study did not allow for the identification of the exact physiological factors involved, it can be inferred that anatomical changes directly influencing voice quality may impact performers' self-efficacy.

Consequently, emotions and self-image might also be negatively influenced and hinder their ability to sing (Ekici, 2022), reinforcing the idea that psychological and emotional factors may affect adolescents' willingness to perform (Xu, 2025). These aspects will therefore be analysed below, following a brief introduction to the possible role of social factors in this context.

Psychosocial circumstances

The social environment faced by young people may directly influence their day-to-day experiences and interests. It is known, for example, that peer influence is very present in adolescents' lives (Laursen and Veenstra, 2021), and the way they are perceived by those around them may be a particularly sensitive aspect. This is especially true for those who are more attuned to other people's views about them, resulting in increased proneness to feelings of shame (Misailidi and Chaliassos, 2024).

However, when Freer (2015) studied male adolescents' engagement in choral activities, he reported positive peer influence as a major factor for willingness to sing, rather than negative

pressures. Nevertheless, further analysis of the article reveals how, for many of the boys, hearing slurs questioning their sexuality due to choir participation weighed on their decisions on whether to continue. It is my understanding that this would count as negative peer pressure influencing students' decision-making and should not be overlooked.

The way they are perceived by others appears indeed to influence adolescents' concerns about singing. Paul, Juncos and Winter (2024) interviewed four adolescent singing students with Music Performance Anxiety (MPA) symptoms who unanimously reported an imaginary or real audience as their greatest preoccupation as performers. Despite the extremely limited sample, this is in keeping with Somerville et al's (2013) behavioural study with a broader sample of 69 participants aged 8 to 22. While this study was not concerned with performers or MPA, it is relevant to this discussion because it found that feelings of self-consciousness and embarrassment experienced by the participants were triggered by the mere anticipation or belief of being watched by a peer. This was particularly significant amongst adolescents and suggests that Paul, Juncos and Winter's (2024) findings related to real and imaginary audiences may not be exclusive to individuals with MPA, but a concern afflicting adolescents in general. It could also explain why some students reportedly hold back and conceal their full range as performers in public (Orton and Pitts's, 2019).

Nevertheless, Paul, Juncos and Winter's (2024) findings highlight how mental health-related difficulties may significantly affect young performers. Recent literature has found that mental health challenges have seen a greater than predicted increase in the adolescent population (Cosma et al, 2025), particularly since the lockdowns imposed during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Wolf and Schmitz, 2024). Despite some researchers being cautious about these statistics and suggesting that increasing awareness about mental health could be driving up numbers of diagnosis (Stevens, 2024; Cosma et al, 2025), there is evidence that the impact of isolation, social media use, and academic pressures could be causing increasingly poor mental health in young people and affecting their enjoyment of different activities in their daily lives (Stevens, 2024). It is therefore possible to infer that these difficulties could exacerbate inhibitions and directly affect adolescents' ability and willingness to let go and sing.

While ACC is, along with other therapeutic and wellness interventions, considered promising for overcoming performance difficulties associated with MPA and can be administered by adequately trained singing teachers (Kinney et al, 2025), not all pedagogues have the means to learn how to do it, nor the time in their teaching day to employ it on students. Similarly, it is known that pre-performance self-compassion routines can be effective for improving confidence and performance, including expression (please see Broomhead,

Skidmore and Eggett, 2010 and Broomhead et al, 2012). However, the scope and aims of this study are specifically on the idea of using VEE to overcome performance inhibitions, rather than how work on performance anxiety could enhance students' VEE. VEE was chosen not only for its artistic value and ability to aid technique (Meissner, 2021), but also due to facilitating an external focus of attention, deemed effective in voice pedagogy because it avoids working with invisible internal movements which are difficult to grasp and less useful for learning (Brand, 2021). This means that the outcome of the sound would be at the forefront of the performer's mind, rather than what is happening physiologically or mentally. For these reasons, VEE work with adolescents will be central throughout the next pages.

Redirecting the focus to VEE

Researchers have pointed out that, despite beliefs that expressiveness needs to be an innate feature of the performer, it is a skill that can be learned (Meissner, 2021; Woody et al, 2024) or developed from pre-existing inherent abilities (Broomhead et al, 2012). However, it should be noted that VEE is described as challenging to teach to anyone, with researchers and pedagogues echoing difficulties I have faced myself in relation to 'verbalizing, assessing, and teaching expression' (Juntunen, Arlin and Liira, 2023, p. 2). Nevertheless, extensive research on the matter has outlined many valuable approaches. These will, once more, be categorised through thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Beginning with Xu's (2025) proposed starting point of concentrating on the **lyrics**, I shall subsequently move on to the remaining themes: **manipulation of musical and acoustic elements, movement and voice**, and, finally, **timing and sequence**.

Lyrics

Maas (2021) has found benefits in discussing the context and background of the songs with students and analysing the words. Stinton (2023) went further and suggested questioning students about the reasons for the choice of certain pitches, types of structure, rhythm, dynamics, and tempo in a composition. These suggestions converge with Meissner's (2021) proposal of dialogical pedagogy to aid the development of expressive performances in adolescents. In other words, dialogues moderated by a teacher who asks open questions about the lyrics or what the students can imagine when they hear the song could help singers think critically about it. They could come up with their own answers and interpretations and find common ground with the lyrics by understanding what they might identify with (Maas, 2021; Meissner, 2021). Contrastingly, Woody et al (2024) experimented with giving students precise instructions based on imagery, such as imagining losing a loved one and the sadness that comes with it or imagining they are happily strolling and singing.

Despite this approach having the potential to put the teacher in a position of dictating interpretation rather than promoting critical and independent thinking, this type of enhanced guidance could be reassuring for inexperienced performers. However, there could be limitations with all these approaches if learners have not lived through certain types of emotions and experiences described in many songs, particularly in the imagery-based strategy (Woody et al, 2024). While it could be argued that, through imaginary circumstances, it is possible to truly connect with a song without having experienced what it conveys, I would still like to pursue the principle that this might not be easy for everyone.

For this reason, Xu (2024) proposed overlooking the lyrics' denoted and connoted meanings. Her idea was inspired by Barthes's (1977) theory that there are two primary levels of interpretation of a photograph: the information level (denoted meaning) and the symbolic one (connoted meaning). In other words, while the denoted meaning is limited to what can be perceived superficially, the connoted one views the object in its symbolic context, like looking at a colour and associating it with a mood, a political party, or a sports team. With musical lyrics, this could involve analysing the meaning and context of the words and what the composer meant by them. Beyond these basic levels of interpretation, Barthes (1977) proposed something named "the third meaning" (p. 53), which "distances itself from the preestablished meanings and embodies [...] the individual's internal world" (Xu, 2024, p.11). Put another way, the third meaning is determined by the observer's perspectives and internal life, broadening the possibilities of interpretation. Taking inspiration from these ideas, Xu (2024) proposed that performers may interpret the music beyond its literal and symbolic meanings and find what it could mean for them individually. In my opinion, this could involve even changing the lyrics' meaning, context, and significance altogether while still uttering the same words. Students could actively visualise a situation closer to their understanding and experience, which may not match the composer's. I believe that, in tandem with other approaches, including dialogical teaching, this could be effective in inspiring lively and original performances, rather than sticking to a copied or flat version of a pop song.

Another proposed approach for working with the lyrics is using prosody and operative words, elements naturally used in speech to aid communication and enhance expressivity. They refer to how we, as speakers, subconsciously stress certain words by employing variations of intonation (pitch), volume, and timing to convey ideas and expression (Chan, 2018). According to Manternach (2025), deliberate prosody work can be transferred into singing and, I infer, might involve helping the singer decide which words to stress throughout the song to better convey the meaning of the lyrics. For Manternach (2025) and Chan (2018), this could be achieved by elongating the most prominent words or syllables, with Chan (2018) even suggesting a potential combination of increased pitch and intensity. Another

way to enhance certain words or syllables would be emphasising consonants by activating articulators such as the jaw, lips, or tongue (Svensson, Lundmark and Erickson, 2024). Further empirical research would be required to understand how these elements could be used in tandem or separately. However, I can argue that simply asking students to choose operative words in a song and use one strategy to emphasise them could be a simple and effective way to enhance VEE and help bring a timid performance to life, as the focus would be mostly on the words and their value, rather than internally on the voice.

Finally, to conclude the section dedicated to lyrics-based work, I should mention the concept of monologuing the lyrics, which allows learners to “explore the words and the subtext unimpeded by prescribed rhythm” (Stinton, 2023, p.27) as well as melody. However, this comes with the caveat of being most effective when students are not yet familiar with the melody and rhythm (Stinton, 2023), which is not always the case with adolescents who just wish to learn to sing their favourite tunes.

This warrants exploration of more strategies to enhance VEE by working with the music itself. The next section will explore the viability of manipulating musical and acoustic features of the song and voice for this end.

Manipulation of musical and acoustic elements

Varying musical elements such as tempo, dynamics, articulation, and phrasing has repeatedly been described as a straightforward way to introduce some degree of VEE with learners (Livingstone, eChoi and Russo, 2014; Maas, 2021; Meissner, 2021) and has been my most basic approach in my own practice. Maas (2021) describes how, for example, choral directors would use attacks on certain consonants to convey the urgency required by specific passages in the music. I infer that this approach could involve focusing on contrasts of dynamics and phrasing or, once more, activating consonant articulators (please see above), helping a performance feel more vigorous and expressive without too much complexity for the student. The work with operative words and prosody might also be particularly effective for this end.

In a more complex domain of VEE, Stinton (2019, 2023) proposed other strategies and frameworks for enhancing interpretation with Musical Theatre performers. While I found that most strategies might be too complex, time-consuming, or potentially perceived as silly or embarrassing by adolescents, the following exercises stood out as potential tools to be used in my specific context:

- One breath for each thought

- Remove the lyrics and sing melody in a single vowel to uncover emotional and expressive features that may be less obvious when the singer is focused on the lyrics. This could increase awareness of any moments of silence and their expressive meaning, as equally suggested by Maas (2021)

While the first approach might be straightforward enough for most, if not all, students, it is possible that the second one may be viewed as more unconventional and only be suitable for more adventurous and advanced students, which is in keeping with the fact that Stinton's strategies were developed with aspiring professionals in mind. However, I would approach these exercises with caution. Despite Stinton's extensive experience, feedback about these strategies stems from anecdotal observations, with little qualitative data formally collected and analysed. There could therefore be a degree of unintentional bias in these observations' interpretation.

Finally, I examined the concept of acoustic manipulation for the enhancement of VEE, a growing area of research. Authors have suggested and experimented with the idea of adopting certain vocal tract adjustments to replicate how some basic emotions sound vocally (Livingstone, eChoi and Russo, 2014; Eyben et al, 2015; Scherer et al, 2017; Hakanpää, Waaramaa and Laukkanen, 2023). However, it was suggested that this approach may stem from imitation of famous singers, hindering the development of students' most authentic vocal sound (Juntunen, Arlin and Liira, 2023). Additionally, this theory of 'basic emotions' has been criticised for a lack of agreement across studies in identifying them and for overlooking both psychological and biological features shared by different emotions, as well as cultural context that may influence their expression and decoding (Cespedes-Guevara and Eerola, 2018). Moreover, it is emphasised how this kind of work requires a good technical foundation (Hakanpää, Waaramaa and Laukkanen, 2023), which is often not the case for the adolescents I work with. Therefore, it could be problematic to apply this in my workplace. Nevertheless, I should point out that, in this domain of VEE and acoustics, researchers also refer to the concepts of valence and arousal. While valence is related to whether a certain emotion has a positive or negative connotation, arousal is concerned with its level of physiological intensity and activity (Scherer et al, 2017; Hakanpää, Waaramaa and Laukkanen, 2021). For example, we could classify tenderness as an emotion associated with a positive valence and low levels of arousal, as it tends to be a very contained sentiment. On the other hand, anger is an emotion with a negative valence that may usually display higher levels of arousal, albeit not always. Focusing on varying arousal levels could both provide a tangible and objective way to address VEE and avoid the risks of oversimplifying emotions (Cespedes-Guevara and Eerola, 2018).

From this section, I could conclude that many of these music-focused approaches might be doable with some of the most reluctant students I work with, particularly where the work is aimed at articulation and dynamics. After all, these are seemingly tangible concepts that I believe almost anyone can grasp and learn how to work with, making them potentially easy to put into practice with adolescents who may not wish to engage in more playful movement-based exercises, to be discussed next.

Movement and voice: the holistic approach

Juntunen, Arlin and Liira (2023) affirm that VEE is inevitably a holistic phenomenon because it involves integrated coordination of the whole body, and that gestures can not only better expressive interpretation, but also vocal technique. This suggests that, despite my study not directly covering bodily expression or stage presence, working on those elements may still aid young students in improving VEE. This is in keeping with data Maas (2021) collected from adolescent choral singers who highlighted that movement improved their sound's expressiveness. Additionally, it is an externally-focused approach (Brand, 2021), which we have seen has advantages.

Many VEE and movement methods described in the literature stem from different acting, movement, and dance methods, or even their combination. These include explorations and adaptations of Michael Chekhov's acting technique (Bennett, 2013) or Laban's Movement Analysis (LMA) (Kilpatrick, 2020), amongst others. The scope of this paper does not allow for the detailed exploration these complex approaches deserve, exposing a significant limitation of this review. However, available literature allowed me to collect a range of movement-based strategies that may suit my needs. Any that I deemed too time-consuming, complicated, or strongly at risk of being perceived as embarrassing were excluded.

Inspired by Michael Chekhov's acting method, Bennett (2013) suggested the following exercises:

- Listening to the song's accompaniment and creating mental images. Make large and abstract movements before reducing them. This is to understand how elements such as dynamics, rhythms, or melodies influence the body
- Attune with the song's atmosphere and move accordingly
- In each musical phrase: one gesture impulsively following the melody
- Small gestures with the hand, vary their quality (gentle versus violent, for example), and progress to bigger and more energetic movements

For more tangible guidelines to carry out the final bullet point, I suggest combining it with Laban's eight effort actions (Fig. 2). These propose precise movement qualities that are both

observable and kinaesthetic (Broughton and Davidson, 2016). Scholarly literature directly linking this work to singing is still scarce (Paschalidou, 2024), and I still find it challenging to fully grasp its components, particularly as someone who has only briefly engaged with this type of work as a performer. For this reason, I would like to suggest a simplified approach to LMA: through dialogue with the teacher, as recommended by Meissner (2021), students could choose key moments in the song warranting a movement, and determine characteristics relating to weight, space, and time for each. Subsequently, there would be a choice of effort or movement to produce in those moments. While this approach would warrant much deeper exploration, more detail might make it challenging to utilise it with adolescents. However, this basic interpretation of LMA helps make it more concrete and accessible, offering students one small way to give their singing more purpose, direction, and expression.

Fig. 2: Laban's eight efforts (extracted from Broughton and Davidson, 2016, p. 5)

Effort-shape component	Metaphoric name	Weight	Space	Time
Basic effort actions	"Punch"	Strong	Direct	Sudden
	"Dab"	Light	Direct	Sudden
	"Press"	Strong	Direct	Sustained
	"Glide"	Light	Direct	Sustained
	"Slash"	Strong	Indirect	Sudden
	"Flick"	Light	Indirect	Sudden
	"Wring"	Strong	Indirect	Sustained
	"Float"	Light	Indirect	Sustained

The other Michael Chekhov-inspired strategies named above appear much more abstract and less prescriptive than the final one. I therefore believe their use with more insecure adolescents warrants caution. After all, when referring to these movement-based approaches, authors frequently allude to the need for performers' playfulness (Cuny, 2022; Stinton, 2023). I believe this is especially true for the more abstract exercises. Moreover, it is stated that singers attempting such exercises should also be unafraid to perform badly (Bennett, 2013), something that I know that not all my students are comfortable with, particularly if self-efficacy is a concern (Xu, 2025). The use of these strategies would therefore require careful encouragement, guidance and, if needed, explanations and dialogue. Not doing so could risk students viewing these approaches as mere "silly dancing around" (Bennett, 2013, p. 154) and potentially expose them to embarrassment and inhibition, cancelling out the aims of the exercise. For these reasons, I would need to accept that these strategies may not be suitable for the most timid or reluctant performers.

One notable oversight of this section is Dalcroze's Eurythmics, a pedagogy centred on learning through "the natural rhythms of the body and the imagination" (Iddings, 2024, p.7) by integrating rhythm, aural skills, and improvisation. While I chose not to explore this pedagogy due to the scarcity of peer-reviewed literature linking it to work with singers, future research could examine how Dalcroze's work might intertwine with Chekhov's method in the context of individual singing lessons, as both are deeply rooted in improvisation work.

Finally, after the analysis of all these approaches, including those in previous sections, it is important to explore the topic of sequence, i.e., at what stage of song work VEE should be introduced, as some researchers believe that to be impactful. This will be the focus of the next section.

Timing and sequence

Literature on the matter of sequence is yet to find a consensus on when to introduce VEE strategies with students, although it is known that for many singers it is preferable to get the technique right before attempting to be expressive (Bennett, 2013). However, Maas (2021) suggests that VEE should be introduced early in the rehearsal process (the 'infused-expression' approach) to prevent limitations caused by technical concerns, a view supported by other studies (Meissner, 2021; Hurley and Atkins, 2022; Atkins and Hurley, 2025). In fact, Woody et al (2024) warned against technique-only instruction that risks making students view music as a mere objective exercise instead of an "affective, and personally subjective art form" (p. 631). However, Juntunen, Arlin and Liira (2023) argue that major technical deficiencies may hinder VEE altogether, leading me to consider the value of a 'post-expression' approach (where expressive elements are added after the basics of the song have been learned) when teaching beginners who may be still dealing with vocal changes and other insecurities.

Despite all Hurley and Atkins's (2022, 2023) earlier research pointing towards the greater efficacy of infused-expression, in 2024 they found that exposure to an expressive model throughout the rehearsal process improved VEE, regardless of sequence. In other words, expressive modelling (from a teacher, perhaps) could be even more effective in enhancing expressiveness than adopting VEE strategies early in the rehearsal process. This certainly warrants caution, as evidence is still limited and it is known that excessive modelling may lead to copying instead of genuine artistry (Crocco, L., McCabe, P. and Madill, C., 2020). However, one should consider: what is more important to achieve with an insecure singer, expression that is found from within through exploration rather than imitation, or performance confidence gained through basic VEE skills that could be a copy of the model? The answer would depend on the exact characteristics of each student, meaning that modelling and

post-expression could be used as a scaffolding strategies, to be abandoned gradually as singers become more confident (Kupers, van Dijk and van Geert, 2015). This highlights the idea that approaches' effectiveness may highly depend on learners' individual characteristics, developed further below.

The tiered approach

Whilst analysing VEE approaches, I have been imagining how my students would react to them. Would they be willing to try them? Would they find them valuable or embarrassing? These thoughts were central to determining which exercises to include in this literature review. However, even after that preliminary selection, I know that some might still have the potential to reinforce feelings of embarrassment in adolescents already prone to them (Misailidi and Chaliassos, 2024) due to the need for playfulness or openness to the abstract. Yet, completely excluding such approaches would severely limit this study's learning outcomes and risk a simplistic and limited conclusion. For this reason, inspired by Tomlinson's (2001) principles of differentiated learning, I am creating a Tiered System to categorise strategies according to their level of complexity. Its goal is to support me in guiding singers to work in ways they find comfortable while still challenging them just enough for learning to occur, in line with Vygotskii and Cole's (1978) theory of "Zone of Proximal Development" (p. 84). The tiers I propose are based on the following of Tomlinson's (2001) dimensions of student readiness:

- Foundational to Transformational
- Concrete to Abstract
- Simple to Complex
- Structured to Open-ended
- Dependent to Independent

Interpreting these dimensions in the context of student development continuum and based on my professional experience, I created the following Tiers:

Tier 1- Foundations: Most suitable for students who do not enjoy singing, to help them overcome reluctance by integrating basic VEE into their performance. Strategies are simple, structured, and concrete. Movement-based exercises are excluded, as they can be abstract and therefore potentially regarded as foolish by students (Bennett, 2013), risking embarrassment.

Tier 2- Development: Suitable for students who enjoy singing but still find it a daunting and potentially embarrassing experience. Exercises are less structured, requiring slightly more

independence and abstract thinking than those in Tier 1. Basic imagination and movement exercises are included.

Tier 3- Exploration: Suitable for performers who are most confident in their voices but still show weariness about how they are perceived by others. They may engage with exercises that are abstract, complex, and open-ended, including movement-based ones that depend on their ability to be playful (Cuny, 2022; Stinton, 2023).

Strategies identified throughout this paper were subjectively reviewed and scored in terms of their challenge level according to Tomlinson's (2001) parameters, as well as potential for embarrassment. This led to their allocation to each tier (details of this process may be found in Appendix A). Fig. 3 reveals my proposed final distribution:

Fig. 3: The Tiered System

Foundations	Development	Exploration
•Prosody/ operative words •Manipulation of musical elements (rhythm, tempo, dynamics, and phrasing) •Work on articulation •One breath per thought •Dialogue about the song's context and background •Imagery instructions		
	•Listening to song's accompaniment and create mental images •Discuss composer's choices •Laban's efforts •Arousal levels	
		•Removing the lyrics and sing melody only •In each musical phrase: one gesture impulsively following the melody •Attune with the song's atmosphere and move accordingly •Barthe's third meaning •Small gestures with the hand; vary their quality and progress to bigger and more energetic movements (Combine with Laban's efforts) •Infused-expression
•Modelling •Post-expression		

While some exercises are deemed unsuitable for students working with lower tiers due to their greater complexity or susceptibility for triggering embarrassment, I believe that those on Tier 3 can benefit from many approaches suggested for lower tiers, if required by a specific song or situation. The exceptions would be the 'post-expression' approach and modelling because, as a potential scaffolding strategies hoping to promote subsequent independence (Tomlinson, 2001; Kupers, van Dijk and van Geert, 2015), they ought to be avoided with students working with the highest tier.

It should be reinforced that this is a system meant exclusively for my own use to help me adjust VEE work to a range of singer types, promoting an empathic pedagogy shaped by the students' circumstances and their needs (Nix, 2017; Fletcher, Davidson and Krause, 2024). It is not intended as a summative assessment tool for students to be aware of. Additionally, as people are always evolving, there is no expectation to keep learners always working with the same tier, otherwise this system risks being reductive rather than work in a continuum, as intended. Students can (and should) move up or down depending on the different stages of their personal and learning journeys. After all, from my professional experience, learning is rarely linear and singers face setbacks that require flexibility from the teacher, which this system hopes to facilitate. It would be possible to even combine strategies from two adjacent tiers, to make progression more gradual, as advised by the theory of 'Overlapping Waves' (Siegler, 2016). Tier transitions would be guided by ongoing formative assessment (Tomlinson, 2005) informed by observations of students' responsiveness and behaviour during lessons.

Finally, I should highlight that, due to being largely inspired by my own experiences, this system presents certain caveats. Its design is subjective and other researchers and pedagogues might suggest a different distribution or more sub-categories, to make progression more gradual. Additionally, this framework involves a collection of small strategies extracted from complete methods, something Hakanpää, Waaramaa and Laukkanen (2023) caution against as it could cause the ideas to get "lost in the metamorphoses and can result in a 'pseudotherapeutic experiment laboratory' where things can go awry fast" (p. 293). After all, methods have been carefully designed to make sure all their elements develop and build on each other, and skipping steps has the potential to be counterproductive. However, even Stinton (2023) recognises that following each step of her own frameworks may not be feasible and endorses their adaptation by teachers as required, suggesting that, when needed, this might be an acceptable course of action.

Limitations and future recommendations

This paper presents limitations. Its scope does not allow for examination of difficulties faced by adolescents with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), nor how VEE work with this population could be developed. Further study would be required to understand unique challenges SEND students might face as performers and how their VEE work might be influenced. Although these individuals could certainly still work with the tiered system, it is not certain that the current distribution of exercises would be the most appropriate for them.

Additionally, further empirical research would be useful to understand how these and other approaches outside of the scope of this paper (particularly Acting Through Song techniques)

might, or not, help inhibited adolescent singers. This knowledge could be extended to rapping as, from my experience, that is the preferred way for many male performers to engage in vocal performance without facing insecurities related to their singing voice (Freer, 2015). Moreover, as I am classing certain strategies as unsuitable for more timid students, future research could explore how such exercises could be adapted for them. One example of this could be assessing the value of mental rehearsal for students unwilling to physically engage in movement-based exercises, as dance studies suggest this could produce significant results (Muir and Munroe-Chandler, 2025).

Finally, future research could still explore how learners' sociocultural, linguistic, or economic backgrounds might affect their VEE work and investigate ways to adapt strategies accordingly.

Conclusion

The complexities of supporting self-conscious adolescent performers were examined. It was seen that there are certain vocal and psychosocial factors largely outside of the singers' (and the teachers') control that may impact their ability to perform freely, potentially leading to flat and one-dimensional performances. While there is knowledge about effective interventions to help students overcome performance inhibitions, this paper suggests that, when employed cautiously, VEE strategies may also promote performance confidence in adolescent singers.

To organise analysed strategies into a workable and easy-to-implement framework, the Tiered System was created. Its goal is to better inform my work with adolescents of different ability levels by swiftly choosing the exercises that could be most appropriate for them, instead of unsuccessfully trying several ones that might be unsuitable and risk even more resistance to singing and expressiveness. The Tiered System may also allow me to adjust difficulty according to students' evolving skills and comfort level.

Ultimately, by developing a clearer approach to VEE with adolescents, alongside a greater understanding of their circumstances and challenges, I may feel more empowered to undertake this kind of work with them. Consequently, I hope to not only help them find joy and confidence in singing but also achieve lively and engaging performances.

Critical Reflection

Before carrying out this critical reflection, I was drawn to Atkins and Murphy's model (1993) due to its level of detail, as well as its focus on thoughts and feelings, encouraging a holistic reflection integrating both reason and emotion-based intuition (Woerkom, 2010). However, I found its five steps challenging to understand and reminisced on the straightforwardness of Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (1988), which had in the past empowered me to carry out an in-depth and well-structured critical reflection, whilst still accounting for the emotional experience. I decided, for this reason, that the reflective practice would be more valuable for me if I adopted the more structured model, so that I could engage in honest reflection without the unease of struggling to fully comprehend a model's steps.

What happened?

This study marked my first immersion in vocal expression and performance inhibitions. While this had the advantage of keeping my mind open to inductively exploring unfamiliar themes without many preconceptions, it also meant that I did not have a clear aim or focus until much later in the process, which greatly delayed progress.

It was also throughout this assignment that I was compelled to acknowledge how little I knew about undertaking a literature review, which caused preliminary concerns about the choice of review style and literature inclusion criteria.

Feelings: emotional response

Writing this assignment was a difficult experience for me. The initial indecisiveness about the topic and subsequent delays were deeply unsettling and frustrating. This was exacerbated by methodological concerns regarding approaches and review styles. The many different definitions and explanations available in the literature confused me greatly, an experience acknowledged by Winter (2023). Moreover, after weeks exploring the theme of VEE and adolescence, believing it to be under-researched, I suddenly discovered a wide range of empirical studies about this exact topic. While this gave me more literature to work with, it also dashed my conviction that I was writing something different, impacting my motivation and making me reprimand myself for simply assuming that my angle had not been explored yet.

Evaluation

Good:

Taking frequent breaks throughout the assignment for leisure or even vacation time allowed for the necessary distance required to better cope with the challenges I was facing, as

highlighted by Mercer and Thomas (2024). Additionally, self-reprimanding was addressed through the practice of self-compassion which, according to Bruk, Scholl and Bless (2022), involves being kinder and less judgemental toward oneself. This was fundamental in helping me concede that I should not have expected myself to simply know about all available literature in advance.

Bad:

Writing about an unfamiliar topic presented the disadvantage of my not fully grasping its scope until a significant amount of reading and writing had already been completed. This led to difficulties in properly synthesising each theme coherently whilst still aiming for analytical depth. Moreover, as I became more engulfed in the assignment, I noticed how I kept debating with myself about the suitability of the analysed strategies for my professional objectives and frequently judging them harshly. This led to ongoing uncertainty about whether such scepticism was rooted in facts or mere cognitive biases, more specifically, confirmation bias (Baddeley, 2015), caused by my less successful experiences dealing with self-conscious adolescent performers.

Analysis

While the late discovery of VEE and adolescence literature initially had a negative impact on me, it turned out to be an important part of the process. It made me return to my original research question, refine my angle for the study, and realise that I had somehow lost track of it. This renewed focus on the question ultimately led to the creation of the tiered system, which became pivotal for the conclusions. Moreover, the tiered system had the added advantage of addressing my confirmation biases by providing a controlled outlet for them, while simultaneously requiring me to critically examine them to categorise the exercises appropriately.

Additionally, despite my reluctance to engage with even more research methodology than before, I found that being more rigorous with inclusion and exclusion criteria gave my work more credibility, because I was continuously evaluating the worthiness of each piece of research and assessing whether it was truly suitable for my question. Similarly, working with Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to Thematic Analysis also proved to be effective for keeping the focus on the question, and helped with structuring the paper and finding a coherent flow for my analysis. Moreover, engaging with meta discourse (Hyland, 2017) helped me not only refine my authorial voice and better connect the different themes, but also made me aware of how I already employed some of its guidelines naturally. This was a reassuring discovery that boosted my confidence in my academic abilities during a particularly trying assignment.

Conclusion & Action Plan

The analysis above shows me that I engaged with all of my Expected Learning Outcomes (please see Component 1) and, to some extent, achieved them, particularly those concerning awareness of adolescents' challenges and VEE strategies. While this started as an almost unknown topic to me, I now have a much greater understanding of which different approaches exist and how they could be used to boost my students' confidence and artistry. The other Learning Outcomes related to methodology and academic writing will always be a work in progress, but I now feel more at ease putting them into practice and hope to continue honing these skills in future papers.

This project felt like a constant clash between my eagerness to learn but also create something presenting a degree of originality, which I find motivating. As I think I will always be managing tension between these two elements, in the future I could potentially mitigate frustrations by starting the assignment with a clearer idea of my topic in advance, to prevent delays and having to rush as the deadline approaches (Grix, 2001). Alternatively, choosing a topic I am already familiar with may allow the swifter identification of an unexplored angle.

Additionally, whenever I engage with Thematic Analysis again for a literature review, I should be more rigorous in the coding process. Although I was meticulous in creating themes and sub-themes that helped shape the text, being more consistent in coding the information I find could save time during the write-up and keep me focused on the research question.

Finally, practising self-compassion in the face of mistakes and shortfalls is something I need to continue doing, not only in my academic endeavours, but also in my work and life, to always protect my mental well-being.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Strategy scoring system

Concrete (0 points)	Intermediate (1 point)	Abstract (2 points)
■ Prosody and operative words	■ Listening to song's accompaniment and create mental images	■ Small gestures with the hand and vary their quality and progress to bigger and more energetic movements (Combine with Laban's efforts)
■ Manipulation of musical elements (rhythm, tempo, dynamics, and phrasing)	■ Dialogue about context and background of the song	■ Barthe's third meaning
■ Work on articulation	■ Work with arousal levels	■ Attune with the song's atmosphere and move accordingly
■ Laban's efforts	■ Imagery instructions	■ In each musical phrase: one gesture impulsively following the melody
■ Discuss composer's choices		
■ Removing the lyrics and sing melody only		
■ One breath for each thought		

Simple (0 points)	Intermediate (1 point)	Complex (2 points)
■ Prosody and operative words	■ Manipulation of musical elements (rhythm, tempo, dynamics, and phrasing)	■ Small gestures with the hand and vary their quality and progress to bigger and more energetic movements (Combine with
■ Work on articulation	■ Discuss composer's choices	
■ One breath for each thought	■ Barthe's third meaning	
■ Listening to song's accompaniment and create mental images	■ Attune with the song's atmosphere and move accordingly	
■ Laban's efforts	■ Removing the lyrics and sing melody only	
■ Dialogue about context and background of the song	■ In each musical phrase: one gesture impulsively following the melody	
■ Imagery instructions		
■ Work with arousal levels		

Structured (0 points)	Intermediate (1 point)	Open-ended (2 points)
■ Prosody and operative words	■ Removing the lyrics and sing melody only	■ Attune with the song's atmosphere and move accordingly
■ Manipulation of musical elements (rhythm, tempo, dynamics, and phrasing)	■ Barthe's third meaning	■ In each musical phrase: one gesture impulsively following the melody
■ Work on articulation	■ Listening to song's accompaniment and create mental images	■ Small gestures with the hand and vary their quality and progress to bigger and more energetic movements (Combine with Laban's efforts)
■ One breath for each thought		
■ Dialogue about context and background of the song		
■ Laban's efforts		
■ Discuss composer's choices		
■ Imagery instructions		
■ Work with arousal levels		
■ Modelling		

Foundational (0 points)	Intermediate (1 point)	Transformational (2 points)
■ Prosody and operative words	■ Barthe's third meaning	■ Attune with the song's atmosphere and move accordingly
■ Manipulation of musical elements (rhythm, tempo, dynamics, and phrasing)	■ Listening to song's accompaniment and create mental images	■ In each musical phrase: one gesture impulsively following the melody
■ Work on articulation	■ Discuss composer's choices	■ Small gestures with the hand and vary their quality and progress to bigger and more energetic movements (Combine with Laban's efforts)
■ Dialogue about context and background of the song	■ Laban's efforts	
■ Imagery instructions	■ Work with arousal levels	
■ One breath for each thought	■ Removing the lyrics and sing melody only	
■ Modelling		

Dependent (0 points)	Intermediate (1 point)	Independent (2 points)
■ Prosody and operative words	■ Barthe's third meaning	
■ Manipulation of musical elements (rhythm, tempo, dynamics, and phrasing)	■ Discuss composer's choices	■ Attune with the song's atmosphere and move accordingly
■ Work on articulation	■ Laban's efforts	■ Small gestures with the hand and vary their quality and progress to bigger and more energetic movements (Combine with Laban's efforts)
■ One breath for each thought		■ Removing the lyrics and sing melody only
■ Listening to song's accompaniment and create mental images		■ In each musical phrase: one gesture impulsively following the melody
■ Dialogue about context and background of the song		
■ Imagery instructions		
■ Work with arousal levels		
■ Modelling		

Scoring:

0-1 points:	Tier 1
2-4 points:	Tier 2
5+	Tier 3

■Prosody and operative word	0
■Manipulation of musical elements (rhythm, tempo, dynamics, and phrasing)	1
■Work on articulation	0
■Laban's efforts	2
■Discuss composer's choices	3
■Removing the lyrics and sing melody only	5
■Listening to song's accompaniment and create mental images	3
■Dialogue about context and background of the song	1
■Work with arousal levels	2
■Imagery instructions	1
■Small gestures with the hand and vary their quality and progress to bigger and more energetic movements (Combine with Laban's efforts)	10
■Barthe's third meaning	6
■Attune with the song's atmosphere and move accordingly	9
■In each musical phrase: one gesture impulsively following the melody	9
■One breath for each thought	0