

How can primal sounds inform and free the musical theatre belt?

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Introduction

The musical theatre belt has, for years, been a controversial topic (Forbes 2018, Moniz 2025, Spivey 2008). Can it be done in a way that is safe and sustainable for musical theatre performers (Forbes 2018, Lebowitz and Baken 2007)? Should it even be taught in university or pre-professional settings (Roll 2014, Weekly and LoVetri 2009)? Can it be done healthfully in the demanding eight shows a week Broadway standard (Moniz 2024)? In this paper I will explore the demand for this sound in current musical theatre practice, and examine what I believe to be a safe and sustainable method of producing and teaching the musical theatre belt sound through the technique of primal sound. I will also reflect critically on my research and its applications within my collegiate level, pre-professional voice studio.

The Musical Theatre Belt Defined

Musical theatre audiences had their first experience with the power of belting in the 1930 production of *Girl Crazy* when Ethel Merman finished “I’ve Got Rhythm” with a sixteen bar sustained C5 that was able to be heard, unamplified, over the orchestration (Bourne, Garnier, and Kenny 2011, Roll 2014). Once that sound had been introduced, there was no going back. Audiences from then until now are drawn to the belt sound for its beauty, emotion, and unique storytelling (Freeman, Green, and Sargent 2015, Roll 2014).

Hall (2014, p. 81) describes the musical theatre belt as, “full, bright, brassy, speech like, loud.” Contemporary female belting expert Roll (2014, p. 16) uses similar words, classifying the contemporary musical theatre belt as, “bright, full, loud singing; vocal technique used in musical theater repertoire; produced by a chest dominant register of the female voice on pitches that are typically produced by the female head register in the range of F4 to F5.” This singing practice has become just as essential to the modern musical theatre performer as its head voice or legit counterpart (Allen-Valeriano, 2023).

This beloved style of belting, however, has become increasingly challenging over the last 20 years as its sound has become more refined and widespread, and composers have pushed the limits of the belt (Bourne, Garnier, and Kenny, 2011). As pop/rock musicals have increased in popularity, the vocal demands of performers have also increased (Roll, 2016). Now the C5 isn’t enough, and as a result, a whole new set of techniques has been born (Flynn, Trudeau, and Johnson, 2020). In a six month study of musical theater audition notices in 2014, Freeman, Green, and Sargen (2015) discovered that Ethel Merman’s money note represented only a third of belting roles for then current Broadway leading ladies, with two thirds of that years’ contemporary shows requiring a D5 and beyond. Further, the audition notices posted in

Backstage magazine revealed that the highest paying jobs on Broadway and Broadway national tours that same year required significantly more belt style than lower paying job offerings (Freeman, Green, and Sargent, 2015).

In this new era of musical theatre, I believe that we have two types of belt sounds: a true, thyroarytenoid (TA) dominant belt, such as the sound Ethel Merman used, and a mix thyroarytenoid (TA) and cricothyroid (CT) belt, such as we might hear from Elphaba in *Wicked* (Bourne, Garnier, and Kenny 2011, Roll 2016). The musculature for singing the TA dominant belt involves the TA muscle shortening and thickening the vocal folds, giving lower more robust sounds, while the musculature for the mixed belt relies on maintaining a balanced positioning of the TA and CT muscles, allowing the two to work in tandem to produce sounds that mimic TA dominant sounds (Lovetri, Lesh, and Woo 1999, Meyer 2024, White 2017, Zuim, Stewart, and Titze 2024). Though current industry terminology surrounding mix or mix belt varies widely (Lebowitz and Baken, 2007), I will defer to Roll's definition for purposes of this paper. She describes mix as simply a combination of both registers used by singers to create a range of styles included in the belt sound (Roll, 2014). Within the mix belt there are variations of the bright, forward CT dominant belt sound, versus the more traditional TA dominant belt sound (Forbes, 2018), such as we might hear from ingénue roles versus heroine roles like Anna and Elsa, respectively, in *Frozen* (Allen-Valeriano, 2023). I believe the mix belt is what enables the physically healthy execution of the D5-F5 extension the last couple of decades have demanded (Roll 2016, White 2017).

Primal Sounds Defined

Oxford English Dictionary (2007) defines primal as "belonging to the earliest time or stage; original, first, primitive, primeval." Primal sound can be compared to laughter, babies crying, speaking, sighing, or yelling (Accetta 2022, Brown 1996, Chapman 2021). These are the involuntary shouts of joy, cries of pain, or grunts of surprise that humans were born with the ability to make efficiently, and for the most part, without damaging or stressing the muscles involved in vocal production (Brown 1996, Chapman 2017, Steinhauer 2024).

Voice therapy expert, author, and collegiate voice teacher, Brown (1996, p. 3) says, "the essence of healthy voice production is the primal sound." He describes primal sound as reflexive, instinctual, and emotional. He encourages singers to trust their involuntary sounds, reminding them that children are not questioning their ability to vocalize when experiencing emotion, they are simply responding to stimuli.

The idea of using primal sounds in teaching or performing the musical theatre belt is centered on the desire to find ways to imitate the natural, healthy sounds our bodies intrinsically know how to make (Chapman, 2017). This includes both the sound itself and the way it is produced (Allen-Valeriano, 2023). Primal sound technique is essentially learning from the way the body already responds vocally, often to an emotion, mimicking a previously involuntary emotional response within the voluntary action of singing, and thus creating a pathway joining the lower brain and its emotional expression to the upper brain and its thinking processes (Brown, 1996).

The Bridge From Primal Sounds to Belting

Estill, American singer, scientist, and pedagogue, talks about how our first sounds as babies are a yell, but then we spend the rest of our lives being told to be quiet (1991). This inevitably creates a negative association with using our voices powerfully. Rodenburg (1992) shares a similar sentiment, highlighting the variety of sounds babies are able, and perhaps even encouraged to make, as compared to the discipline children receive when the sounds they make or the words they use are not pleasing to the adults around them. In early belting instruction, Estill's method uses a yell sound in conjunction with physical movement to free the student from the bonds leftover from childhood and empower them to use their voice with joy (Estill, 1991). Exercises in the Estill model use sounds students have been making all their lives, sounds that Estill student Sussuma claims had been, "trained out of me," (Speed, Chircurel, and Sussuma, 2011, p.24). After awakening natural, though perhaps dormant behaviors, such as laughing, crying and yelling, the student is then guided to become in tune with the specific muscular changes that accompany the primal sounds (Steinhauer and Klimek, 2019). Estill Voice Training advocates for singing to be approached through the same psychological lens as if the student were an athlete (Brown 2013, Steinhauer 2024). Just as a runner trains for an athletic event, the muscles we use for singing can be trained for performance with practice and intention (Steinhauer and Klimek, 2019).

Further, Chapman links the emotional motor system and the voice through primal sounds (Chapman, 2021). Her research shows that primal sound both identifies and strengthens connections to neuromuscular patterns that recruit the correct sequence of muscular interactions to produce free and connected singing (Chapman, 2017). While involuntary primal sound responses help us feel and recreate emotional pathways and sounds, singers cannot stop there, but instead, choose to enter into emotional recall and allow their emotions to lead the system (Brown, 1996). It is the recalling of emotional response through the brain's network of emotional pathways that will drive the correct sequence of respiratory, laryngeal, facial, and muscular response (Chapman 2021, Rodenburg 1992, Scherer 1995). With this muscular

coordination in place, Chapman believes singing can feel easy and free while being emotionally potent and transfixing (Chapman 2021, Krasnodębska, et al. 2024, Ohrenstein 2000).

Students trying to find their belt sound often have to overcome habits they have formed in singing or in life (Smith-Vaughn, Hooper, and Hodges, 2013). I have found that students who are brand new to belting are more willing to try out new sounds and techniques if they are freed from their expectations of sounding right or lovely (Ohrenstein, 2000). Approaching belting from a stand point of making noises breaks through the nerves and the habitual expectation of what I should sound like when I sing, and clears the path for vocal exploration (Steinhauer and Klimek, 2019). Here, primal sounds give us a trustworthy foundation (Chapman, 2021). Everyone can make a cry sound; try it on pitch and access tone we can use as a bridge to your belt (Allen-Valeriano, 2023). In playing around with primal sound production, we can break through the unhelpful habits singers have picked up along the way (Rodenburg, 1992) and return to techniques that help us work with our bodies instead of against (Brown, 1996). Often, using primal sounds can unlock new tools and versatility in the voice, and help singers find their belt sound (Allen-Valeriano, 2023).



Gibb's Reflective Cycle (University of Hull, 2024)

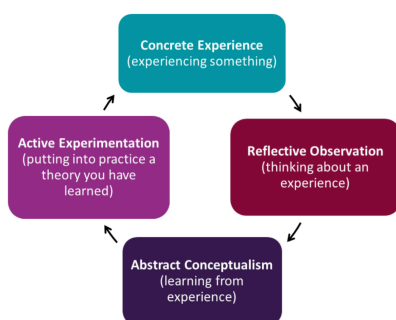
As I reflect on this most recent semester of teaching, my process has mimicked Gibb's reflective cycle (Galli and New, 2022). I have been using primal sounds to teach belting for many years. In my experience, just as the literature suggests, primal sounds have worked beautifully for a large percentage of my students (Accetta 2022, Brown 1996, Steinhauer and Klimek 2019). Most showed significant progress in both finding and freeing the belt (Chapman, 2021). Reflecting on this semester in particular, however, there have been new,

unexpected challenges. I have several students that are uncomfortable experimenting with noises. A couple are so concerned with being correct that they do not want to engage. A couple have been too scared of others hearing and judging them. Some have tried but have not invested fully or have held onto their version of their singing voice so tightly that we have not broken through yet (Ohrenstein, 2000). Struggling to this degree with this number of students feels frustrating and unprecedented. In evaluating those feelings, I realized that my frustrations were mostly happening in lessons with students who were brand new to musical theatre singing. This sent me back into primal sound research, focusing specifically on a broader range of language around teaching primal sound and analyzing tactics and exercises to promote engagement from more timid students (Steinhauer, 2024). This analysis led me to the

conclusion that the exercises are working, but patience and variety in language cues are important from a teaching standpoint, paired with faithful practice from the students. A new strategy that has emerged from my research is to do the same exercises, but frame them with different words (Stoney, 2024). For example, introducing the primal sound exercise by emphasizing that this is an exercise separate from the song or even separate from singing entirely produced better results for some of those reluctant students (Ohrenstein, 2000). It has also been very helpful in my strategic planning to watch videos of Estill and Chapman teaching or discussing their use of primal sounds. Teaching voice is such a fluid practice. There is no right path that fits every student identically (White, 2017). My strategy moving forward with this is to continue to read and watch and learn in order to avoid becoming stagnant in my teaching, experimenting with new tactics while continuing to persevere with what has worked before (Weekly and LoVetri, 2009).

The Technique of Primal Sounds in Belting Postural Alignment

In seeking to teach the practice of primal sound as a bridge to belting, there is much overlap in pedagogy (Roll 2016, Weekly and LoVerti 2009). LoVetri, Chapman, and Brown all heavily emphasize postural alignment; in fact, Chapman and Brown begin their models with discussion around physicality (Brown 1996, Chapman 2017, White 2017). Chapman describes postural alignment as one of the core components of singing, along with primal sound, and breathing and support (Chapman, 2022). The lungs and the muscles involved in breathing do their most efficient work when the body is properly aligned (Brown, 2013). If a singer allows bad habits to shift the body out of alignment, the singer will work harder to produce quality sound (Chapman, 2017). If left unchecked, this can lead to physical overcompensation (Ohrenstein 2000, White 2017). Using the natural alignment of the body can prevent discomfort and injury (Chapman, 2017). The body relies on good alignment to breathe efficiently. If the flexibility of the spine is manipulated too far, the diaphragm cannot function sufficiently for the demands of breathing for singing (Brown, 1996).



Kolb's Learning Cycle (University of Hull, 2024)

As I learned about postural alignment and its foundational importance to primal sound as a bridge to belting, I began to evaluate my teaching techniques against my research. Using Kolb's learning cycle (Kolb, et al 2014) I began to examine my concrete experience in this discipline. In my teaching practice I have encouraged postural alignment, but with reflective observation I see that I have not done enough in this area. My

research has shown me the significance of both starting with and maintaining postural alignment as a habitual practice for pre-professional singers (Brown 2013, Chapman 2017, White 2017). The next step in Kolb's cycle, abstract conceptualization, demands that my strategy as a teacher shift to include more conversation and implementation tactics both in my one-on-one lessons and in their weekly practice plan. Moving forward, I will give more attention and practice strategies to my students in this area. In laying the ground work for students to produce a healthy belt sound, postural alignment can not be overlooked (Brown, 2013). In order to help students accomplish their goals around belting through the technique of primal sound, I have to stay alert to ways they might be sabotaging themselves or making themselves work harder or even sustain an injury. Active experimentation in this area might look like me simply being more specific and persistent with students in their individual lessons. Another strategy for active experimentation could be a masterclass where the basics of postural alignment are taught and discussed in a group setting.

Breathing for Singing

The consensus around breath in the primal sounds conversation seems to be trusting the body's natural system while simultaneously training the body's natural system to respond powerfully, thus connecting primal sound with abdominal support (Chapman, 2021). Both Estill (1991) and Brown (1996) describe having students place a hand on their chest and a hand just under the rib cage. With hands in that position, they lead students through a series of exercises to feel how the body responds naturally to slow, relaxed breaths, quick, surprise breaths, slow release of air, etc. The goal here is again to return to the body's natural way of working, observing and implementing unhindered breath and muscle engagement (Steinhauer and Klimek, 2019). Another technique Brown (2003) used to illustrate the natural movement of breathing for singing is to have the student lay on their back. As the body relaxes, the student will experience the movement of the diaphragm and how that movement feels in their body. Once they experience this feeling, they are better able to return to a standing position and re-create it intentionally (Brown, 1996).

Before I began this research, I taught breathing for musical theatre singing and belting much like what Brown describes in his book (1996), focusing on teaching the purpose and movement of the diaphragm and the engagement of the abdominal muscles. Using the lens of Schön's method of reflection-in-action (Schön and Bintley, 1993), I would consider a student's abdominal movement in their lesson and react to correct if they weren't doing it the way I prescribed. My immediate action in lessons was to use a variety of teaching tactics and exercises to impose one method of breathing for singing. As I have engaged in more research I've been able to

critically reflect on these teaching methods, specifically in the context of using primal sound as a bridge to belting. As I assimilated what I was learning, my research enabled reflection-on-action (Schön and Bintley, 1993), and inspired me to study a varying range of breathing techniques used by primal sound pedagogues. As a result, my strategy has shifted; I am now taking a more broad approach to teaching breathing for singing. Listening to Chapman talk about the body's natural systems of recall was a break through moment in my pedagogical practice around teaching breath (Chapman, 2021). Current research suggests that there is more than one efficient and effective breath strategy available to the professional singer (Cunsolo 2022, White 2017). I plan to continue to research and develop my strategies for teaching breathing to pre-professional musical theatre students and thus, to employ the double loop learning process (1978, Argyris and Schön, cited Carey, Harrison, and Dwyer, 2017) by revisiting my assumptions and teaching procedures around breath for singing as I continue to learn and broaden my knowledge in this area.

Trusting Your Body

In the world of primal sounds there is an emphasis on trusting the postural alignment and breath over the actual sound (Chapman, 2021). This requires the singer to trust what they feel over what they hear (Ohrenstein, 2000). What they hear internally isn't an accurate representation of what the audience hears (Brown, 1996). Specifically when it comes to new belt sounds, many of my students have expressed that they are initially unhappy with their perception of the sound. Estill encouraged her students to replace efforts to listen to their own voice with listening to their body (1991). My hope as a teacher is that students will grow confident in their belt technique so that breathing naturally and correctly and being in tune with their postural alignment will be so habitual that they will quickly be able to identify when something is off (Allen-Valeriano, 2022). I want to equip them with the tools to trust what they feel when they belt and to assess and reboot as needed (White, 2017). One of my strategies moving forward will be asking my students to describe how these primal sounds and belting sounds feel in their body (Steinhauer and Klimek, 2019) . If we make an adjustment, can they compare how that felt different physically (Smith-Vaughn, Hooper, and Hodges, 2013)? What do they already know that might help them return to better technical habits as we try to find and refine the belt (Steinhauer and Klimek, 2019)?

Though the research shows that the body can be trusted in the context of musical theatre belting, one point of contention in this trust your body conversation is the question, can the body lead us astray (Morgan, 2024)? We have to consider the effect of negative emotion on the body

and it's potential to derail the work (Ohrenstein 2000, Rodenburg, 1992). When the singer is actually experiencing negative emotion as they sing, excess tension can result (Krasnodębska, P. et al. 2024, Rodenburg 1992). Scherer, based on his studies of emotional expression through the voice, says that the singer's personal, physiologically rooted emotional state at a given performance time is a major factor in their internal vocal production (1995). Further, a recent study on the impact of emotions and stress on vocal production concluded that positive and negative emotions altered the muscular response in the vocal tract at levels corresponding to the intensity of the emotions (Krasnodębska, et al., 2024). As a result, there may be instances where students need to separate themselves from the emotional reaction of the character they are portraying and find a way to express the emotion without involving the body in a way that brings constriction to the muscles involved in producing the sound (Morgan, 2024).

We have many voices confirming the body's ability rely on primal sounds as a bridge to belting (Brown 2003, Chapman 2017, Steinhauer and Klimek 2019); we have many voices cautioning against the effects of negative emotion on the body (Krasnodębska, P. et al. 2024, Ohrenstein 2000, Rodenburg 1992). Though these two ideas seem to be in contradiction of each other, I believe both things can be true. The literature confirms that students need to be trained to recognize and maximize their body's natural systems, as well as attending to the effects of both their own emotional state and their portrayal of scripted emotions on their vocal health. Instead of existing in conflict, I believe these ideas could function as guardrails to protect students from allowing the pendulum to swing too far in either direction. As I move forward with teaching belting through primal sounds, my research-based strategy will now include awareness and conversation around negative emotion and its effect on the musculature of the voice in addition to helping students trust their body to do the work efficiently.

A specific strategy I intend to use with my students in the future is to address the effects of negative emotion through awareness of tension in the body. One of the most common negative habits I see in students is interfering vocal tension (Brown 1996, Rodenburg 1992). Primal sound technique applied to belting can often bring about healthy, sustainable singing, but vocal tension has the potential to sabotage and put the singer at risk for injury (Brown, 2013). Vocal tension can be a result of rigidity in the interarytenoid muscles, the arytenoid muscles, the larger neck muscles, or more general inflexibility in the body (Smith-Vaughn, Hooper, and Hodges, 2013). Not surprisingly, a common theme supporting the study of using primal sounds in belt production is the elimination of this unproductive tension in students (Brown, 1996). Though extraneous tension in a singer might be expected primarily in the neck or jaw, in reality, it can show up anywhere in the body and it's presence is very limiting to healthy, sustainable vocal

technique (Chapman 2006, Ohrenstein 2000). If any part of our body is holding tension, it has the potential to translate into excessive pressure on the vibrations of the vocal folds, thus having a negative and potentially dangerous affect on continued vocal production (Smith-Vaughn, Hooper, and Hodges, 2013). Overcoming this issue while singing or belting will either require intense amounts of effort for vocal production or will be found impossible by the singer (Rodenburg, 1992). We can't expect to put our bodies in stress and still be able to generate healthy singing habits; we must lean into the way our bodies function naturally and let that function lead us to vocal health and sustainability (Chapman, 2021). Primal sound technique can be a bridge to help students find vocal execution that allows for quality sound with the least amount of effort and negative tension (Brown 1996, White 2017).

Conclusion

The idea of honoring one's body by using primal sounds as a bridge to the musical theatre belt is fascinating. It has been such an exciting part of my teaching journey and has brought so much fun to my lessons. Watching students realize what they are capable of even as they are finding vocal and physical freedom is an incredible joy. Returning to Kolb's learning cycle to process what I'm learning has been extremely helpful (Kolb, et al 2014). I have many years of experience with trying primal sounds as an approach to unlocking the musical theatre belt, but I did not have research backing my ideas. It was a technique I discovered organically as I imitated sounds I heard, attempted them myself, then experimented with in lessons with students. Reflecting on this led me to want to research and learn what others had already pioneered in this area. The more I read about primal sound techniques the more excited I am to get back into the studio and implement new tactics. I certainly want to continue to research and strengthen my teaching skills particularly in the areas of postural alignment and breathing for singing; see specific strategies in my personal development plan in appendix one. I also think it would be valuable to continue to learn practical strategies for helping students combat acquired interfering tension in their bodies.

Resource List

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Appendix 1: Personal Development Plan

	Goal	Objective	Action	Timescale
Practice	Expand my toolbox of exercises and tactics for using primal sounds as a bridge to belting	Help every student reach their belting goals	Watch or read about leaders in this area of study working with students.	Winter break (end of November to early January)
Academic	Watch a variety of short courses on more areas of study not just my favorites	Broaden my study of the voice	Build in time to my work schedule to watch VSC short courses	Beginning now and continuing throughout the school year
Research	Become more knowledgeable in current research in the area of breathing for singing	Be comfortable teaching multiple strategies for breath	Research strategies of teaching breath for singing	2025
	Have multiple verbal cues for teaching postural alignment	Not being forgetful in this area or letting it slip out of focus in favor of more exciting things	Research strategies for teaching postural alignment	2025
Career	Full time collegiate work	Be ready when my current university creates their next full time musical theatre position	Continue taking on classes/roles at my current university, search local and online job postings	2026-2027, 2027-2028 school year