

Module 4 - BMPF7073D

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Voice authenticity in singing:

Navigating definitions, social expectations, self-discrepancies, and barriers to expression - A conceptual and pedagogical exploration

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COMPONENT 1 - PORTFOLIO

Introduction

A question that frequently arises in my singing classes is, 'How can I determine what *my* voice is like?'. Students ponder their unique voice and wish to discover how they genuinely sound without subconsciously imitating other singers. The concept of authenticity in music and vocal identities has been a subject of debate in literature, with its definition varying across genres and cultures (Moore, 2002). Although improvising a song, as suggested by La Roche (2021), seems a satisfactory solution for most of my students, it is not always an option due to shyness or discomfort. Shifting from surface-level observations to a deeper exploration of underlying structures and assumptions about voice authenticity raises the question of how vocal authenticity is conceptualised in the literature, and what psychological and pedagogical barriers are identified as limiting singers' access to a more authentic vocal expression?

Planned Programme of Study

Context

Singers desire to sound authentic in their voice and singing style (Morand, 2006) as well as within their cultural context (Eidsheim, 2019). Literature on singers' authentic voices is limited. One of the most prevalent ideas is that the listener shapes what is perceived as authentic, serving as a mirror for the singer (Smith and Chipman, 2007) or acting as a judge (Moore, 2002). Additionally, transitions such as puberty (Monks, 2003), voice disorders (Crow, van Mersbergen, and Payne, 2019), and hormonal changes (Afsah, 2024) can affect a singer's sense of vocal identity or congruence. Definitions of authenticity vary, complicating the identification of obstacles to achieving it.

Aim and objectives

I aim to investigate various meanings of 'authenticity' in relation to the singing voice and identify psychological and pedagogical barriers that singing students face in accessing this authenticity.

To achieve this aim, I defined the following objectives:

- Compare concepts of authenticity across pedagogical and psychological frameworks, and clarify my perspective on authenticity for this assignment.
- Categorise and analyse the obstacles identified in the literature limiting singers' vocal authenticity.
- Identify pedagogical considerations that may support students in cultivating their own sense of vocal authenticity.

Expected learning outcomes

- Understand the philosophical underlying questions about authenticity in singing.
- Identify at least three significant issues that prevent singing students from being true to their voice.
- Grow in awareness of how the barriers identified in the literature may be present in my teaching context or student experiences.

Activities to be undertaken

Significant literature exists addressing barriers such as puberty and dysphonia. I aim to explore a more conceptual approach to the topic. This will require structure, which I do

not naturally possess. Below is an outline, provided for the sake of proactivity and organisational convenience, as suggested by Booth, Colomb, and Williams (2003).

I will use academic databases such as UWTSD's library and JSTOR, along with Google Scholar, which includes grey literature in its results. Indeed, it appears unlikely that there will be sufficient material to cover the topic using solely peer-reviewed literature. Moid, Raza and Jahan (2020) argue that grey literature is becoming increasingly important for providing depth and originality, especially in underexplored research areas. The keywords in the lexical fields of 'vocal authenticity in singing', 'voice identity' and 'vocal congruence' will be used.

First, I will read and compare definitions of authenticity while reading on barriers to authenticity in singing. Then, I will categorise these barriers and select those relevant to addressing the sense of self in the singing voice: this will define subheadings. I will then critically reflect on the findings and explore future recommendations for a practical approach to addressing barriers to authenticity in the singing studio.

Throughout the reading and writing process, I will journal, following Meyer and Willis' (2018) advice for novice researchers, to articulate my thoughts and create a platform for expressing emotions. This practice will also facilitate the composition of the critical reflection and increase my understanding of the processes associated with academic writing.

Timeline

	ISO (International Organization for Standardization) WEEK #																	
	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
Literature research																		
Narrow down the subject + research question																		
Comp. 1: Draft writing for each subheading																		
Comp. 1: Finish writing																		
Comp. 2: Refine plan																		
Comp. 2: Commentary on authenticity																		
Comp. 2: Narrative review																		
Write future recommendations + conclusion																		
Critical reflection																		
Proofread and send draft																		
Implement comments and corrections																		
Proofread and send final assignment																		

Methodology

I am approaching the research question through a subjectivist paradigm. While authenticity is often described as a co-constructed concept (Moore, 2002; Eidsheim, 2019), fitting within a constructivist paradigm, I am exploring a definition that enables students to be fully themselves. By connecting to what is inherently present within, they can immerse entirely in *their* authentic subjectivity (Bonnett, 2009). Subjectivism helps me interpret the different conceptualisations of authenticity as something felt, and I am interested in how singers make sense of their own constraints, treating internal experience as data.

The project report will first explore conceptualisations of voice authenticity, then explore barriers to accessing it. While this review is inspired by the principles of a scoping review—particularly the aim to map ‘key concepts that underpin a research area’ (Peters et al., 2015, p. 142)—, I acknowledge that the limited word count, timeframe, and individual authorship make a fully comprehensive scoping review unfeasible. Instead, each section follows a distinct methodological approach: definitions of authenticity in the singing voice will be framed within a commentary, and barriers to authenticity will be explored using a narrative review. Winter (2022) recognises ‘a sensitive boundary line’ (p. 134) between these two methodologies. Drawing on Hyland (2005), she argues that authorial presence is more evident in a commentary than in a narrative review, where it is more discreet. These two forms represent opposite ends of a continuum characterised by originality and humility.

The choice of commentary for the first part of the review was made due to the varying conceptualisations of authenticity depending on the context, such as performance (Moore, 2002), philosophy (Cavarero, 2005), psychology (Podesva and Callier, 2015; Crow, van Mersbergen and Payne, 2019), self-knowledge (Anderson, 2009), or emotion (Livingstone, Choi and Russo, 2014). To subsequently engage in a narrative review of barriers to authenticity, which will respect the limited word count allowed for Module 4 and its relevance to my practice, I will need to narrow down the conceptual definitions of authenticity that fit the subjectivist paradigm. The aim of choosing a commentary is not to assert my definition of authenticity as objective truth but ‘to claim an equality with [the] audience and create a sense of a joint pursuit of the same (...) goals’ (Hyland, 2005, p. 71), hence evolving together with a tacit agreement of which type of authenticity will be explored in the second part of the assignment. To follow Crismore, Markkanen and Steffensen’s (1993) categorisation of metadiscourse, I wish that the commentary will help me ‘build a relationship with [the] reader’ (Hyland, 2005, p. 34) and ‘draw [the] reader into dialogue with [the] writer’ (p. 132).

The narrative review, as the second part of the report, will balance authorial voice with a more genuine curiosity (Green, Johnson and Adams, 2006) about the barriers affecting a singer’s access to their authentic voice, conducted from a neutral point of view

(Cooper, 1988). Writing it after completing the first part may lead my positionality to affect the inclusion/exclusion criteria. Indeed, the research question is shaped around authenticity—a highly subjective concept (Zheng et al., 2020). I may selectively include only papers that align with my definition of authenticity, favouring those that support my ontological views, which Grant and Booth (2009) warned about in literature reviews. Goundar (2025) defines positionality as the awareness of potential conflicts of interest while undertaking research. This potential conflict of interest and possibly biased position is accepted, as it appears to be the most efficient way to engage in the debate within a limited word count.

The idea of inner truth and genuine vocal identity will structure—perhaps limit—the selection of papers, as I understand authenticity primarily as a personal, internal experience rather than a socially constructed one. As a teacher, I am mainly interested in students expressing themselves from a deeply personal place. While I acknowledge and accept the bias induced by this stance, it is essential to establish a reflexivity framework that will help me remain mindful of my influence on the research process throughout the entire assignment, thereby enhancing credibility and rigour (Jootun, McGhee, and Marland, 2009). I must avoid becoming conceited in my assumptions and remember that my stance, by definition, is not objective.

The inclusion criteria are works that intersect singing voice with a sense of identity and truth to the self. Papers discussing physiological changes will not be excluded outright but may instead be included to support or challenge various claims throughout the reviews, though they will not be the primary focus. The same applies to papers regarding biological change and the sense of self through voice. To maintain a current understanding of the ‘ever-changing nature of vocal pedagogy’ (Clark, 2024, p. 50), preference will be given to literature published within the past 25 years, except for seminal philosophical definitions and frameworks.

White and grey literature will be used. In an attempt to triangulate (Denzin, 2017), I aim to utilise at least 50% of peer-reviewed literature. I will need to include theses and dissertations by voice teachers and music students, as they appear to be helpful for the

topic I intend to review. Those will also provide access to a range of white literature in their bibliography. Books will be included for their capacity to offer sustained and in-depth engagement with the topic (Zhang and Zhou, 2020). Magazine articles will be excluded due to their typically brief and superficial treatment, which does not align with this project's intended reflective and profound stance. I approach this project with both an insider and outsider lens (Goundar, 2025), as, while I have been teaching for more than 10 years, I come from an uninformed perspective on what prevents singers from voice authenticity.

COMPONENT 2 - PROJECT REPORT

Introduction

Voice has been described as a significant indicator of individuality (Crow, van Mersbergen, and Payne, 2019). Literature agrees on its association with identity (La Roche, 2021). While many papers discuss the spoken voice, the singing voice presents more complexities due to its connection to the concept of 'authenticity in music'. Within the realm of music, the voice is a particularly unique instrument as it is directly linked to the self (Moss Erickson, 2022). In an attempt to better guide my singing students in discovering their authentic voice, I will first explore the conceptualisations of voice authenticity. Clarifying what can constitute vocal authenticity is essential, as it is likely that each student possesses a unique interpretation. In the subsequent section, I will examine the barriers typically encountered in the pursuit of authenticity, with the intention of identifying and mitigating them within my practice. The process of stripping will create a more barren landscape, providing an unobstructed canvas upon which my students and I can explore our work on their voice authenticity. This is all with the intention to find what Smith and Chipman (2007) termed a 'naked voice'. Translations from non-English sources are my own.

PART 1 - Conceptualising voice authenticity in the literature

Fragmented definitions

There is general agreement in the literature that authenticity encompasses multiple conceptualisations (Gocet Tekin and Satıcı, 2014). This is also true for authenticity in singing (Blackburn, 2020). Lehman et al. (2019) argue that researchers use the same term while frequently examining the concept from various viewpoints and meanings.

Some academics define the specific authenticity they discuss at the beginning of the paper, which helps clarify the paper's content, but not the concept itself. Nunes, Ordanini, and Giambastiani (2021), drawing on Teas and Palan (1997), refer to it as 'conceptual ambiguity' (p. 1). In addition to conceptual ambiguity, each definition of authenticity raises further questions as it is examined more deeply. Therefore, attaining a comprehensive and objective understanding of the concept in its entirety is complex at best, perhaps impossible at worst.

Drawing on Jongman-Sereno and Leary's (2019) research, which highlights the multifaceted nature of the term by providing a critical overview of distinct yet interconnected conceptualisations of authenticity, I will identify below concepts frequently used in the literature regarding the authenticity of the singing voice.

The listener

According to Pinheiro et al. (2021), listeners can accurately distinguish between a genuine and volitional sound in the speaking voice. They can infer a speaker's or singer's behavioural and physical traits and moods from their voice alone (Podesva and Callier, 2015). However, Eidsheim (2019) notes that these inferred characteristics may not be factually accurate. She argues that this habit is shaped by assumptions, often racialised. It supports the idea that vocal authenticity is perceived and negotiated, rather than fixed. Consequently, the listener significantly influences the perception of one's authenticity. They may even inhibit various depictions of a singer's vocal quality: if a singer demonstrates proficiency in multiple styles, they are unlikely to be regarded as possessing a singular 'authentic style or voice' (Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 393).

Moore (2002) posits that authenticity is a construction made on the act of listening (p. 210). This perspective implies that authenticity is primarily subjective, as initially constructed by the listener, revealing more about the listener's perceptions than about the performer. Van Leeuwen (2001) concurs and emphasises the importance of acknowledging listener subjectivity. He argues against the objective measurement of

authenticity, shifting the question: authenticity may be about asking for whom something is authentic. Consequently, notions of authenticity reflect the listener's belief systems and values. On a larger scale, Blackburn (2020) questions the role of listeners in gendered expectations of vocal expression: women's voices are expected to be higher (Cavarero, 2005), and men using falsetto can be ridiculed (Eidsheim, 2019). Due to our society's heteronormative scope, this affects whether artists are perceived as 'authentic'.

Culture, sense of belonging and performance

This prompts us to reflect on how society shapes who we are as singers. While the previous example of gendered expectations is considered harmful by the examined literature, the sense of belonging to a group or a specific culture can be beneficial for discovering one's voice identity, which aligns with Jongman-Sereno and Leary's (2019) perspective, stating that knowing who we are aids in finding authenticity.

According to Brosseau (2019), singing 'creates identity and difference' (p. 117); singing as a group affirms our values. This identity through group membership translates in the context of genres, where authenticity becomes about representing the group, not the self. In rock culture, singers are perceived as more authentic when their voice embraces the stereotypical characteristics of the genre (Moore, 2002). Moore posits that authenticity is about *who* is being authenticated, and by *which group*. Thus, the authority is given to the group that authenticates us as singers. This aligns with Van Leeuwen's (2001) perspective explored earlier: ascribed authenticity reveals more about who authenticates than about who is being authenticated. This creates a circular causality dilemma: do we strive to belong to a group reflecting our innate values, as suggested by Kristof's (1996) person-organisation fit theory, or do we adopt the group's values due to wanting to belong, as proposed by Tajfel and Turner's (2004) social identity theory (explored further in Part 2)? In either case, this tension may influence how singers perceive authenticity within group contexts and may shape singers' vocal behaviour more than they consciously realise.

Although relational input, such as external feedback, is crucial in helping singers develop an understanding of their authentic identity (Smith and Chipman, 2007), the quest for personal identity through voice becomes complex when one must conform to societal norms and standards. The circular causality dilemma reemerges: how can one avoid losing oneself in the group's standards, and is it even possible to grow without this relational structure? This raises the question of how a voice might differ if it originated from identical physiology, with the individual evolving in a different culture. Would one voice be regarded as more authentic than the other? According to Van Leeuwen (2001) and Moore (2002), the answer would possibly be negative; the perceived authenticity of a voice is determined by a group's values, which may differ significantly between cultures, rendering direct comparisons untenable. Each voice could be perceived as authentic, but only within the specific cultural framework it aligns with.

Grossberg (1992) transitions from the group connection to the inner connection by explaining how the authentic rock singer articulates 'private but common desires' (p. 207), meaning that they draw from what is within to connect with the group (the audience). For Neumark (2010), drawing on Cavarero (2005), a voice can invite the other into a close relationship, therefore recreating a sense of connection, both through voice quality and performance. Smith and Chipman (2007) concur and emphasise the importance of honesty from performers, particularly on stage, where the audience seeks a genuine connection with the singer. The importance of honesty on stage also resonates with how scholars have conceptualised performance more broadly, as a way to be authentic and express vocal identity: Blackburn (2020) states that 'we perform the way we imagine ourselves' (p. 99). Although he does not reference empirical studies to support this claim, he presents a compelling theoretical and philosophical argument suggesting that individuals can cultivate a sense of identity through performance. This aligns with O'Bryan's (2015) position, which posits that many social constructivist theories advocate for the existence of multiple identities; this will be discussed further below. If we develop how we present ourselves through performance, we may embrace other identities, perhaps even identities we would not dare to display in a non-performance context.

Smith and Chipman (2007), who advocate for a ‘naked voice’ (p. 3)—one that reveals the singer’s essence—recognise that the singer may still have to act. In the context of performance, this raises the question of whether singers are indeed aligned with what feels true within, and perhaps solely the singer can address this question.

Multiplicity of selves

O’Bryan’s (2015) research displayed how classical singers view their musician identity as a connection between the voice and the self. How can a singer connect to their authentic voice when they are facing the multiplicity of selves? In 1890, James, a philosopher and significant figure in psychology (Schultz and Schultz, 2016), stated that ‘a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him’ (p. 294). Linking back to O’Bryan’s (2015) perspective, we may experience multiple identities, applied to our current, past and future selves throughout life. This is well-connected to the consensus in the literature regarding voice changes throughout an individual’s lifespan. Specifically, the voice undergoes acoustic modifications (Stathopoulos, Huber, & Sussman, 2011), and may also be affected by psychological factors, contributing to voice disorders (Aldridge-Waddon et al., 2023).

Denison and Denison (2019) discuss beliefs about the self in relation to adolescent singers’ voice change. While they acknowledge long-lasting beliefs, they paradoxically suggest they are also dynamic. This is a noteworthy argument that posits that despite undergoing change, singers maintain their unique selves through their unique voices. Blackburn (2020) insightfully defines voice as ‘an active agent in the continuing ontogenesis of identity, rather than as an expression of a fixed ontological state’ (p. 100). This may be a foundational framework for understanding authenticity as authentic individuals with multiple facets. Blackburn elegantly shifts the discourse by recommending we now examine ‘vocalizations of identities to vocalizations as identities’ (p. 91). This approach encompasses the multiplicity of selves, asserting that humans

are more complex than a single objective truth, with multiple ways of expressing themselves through singing.

Definition for Module 4

I have explored various definitions of authenticity. Below, I outline the specific form of vocal authenticity adopted for the remainder of this assignment. The barriers examined in subsequent discussions will be analysed within this framework. This aligns with my subjective understanding of authenticity in my dual roles as a Master's student and voice instructor, thereby providing a coherent structure for the remainder of the paper.

According to Crow, van Mersbergen, and Payne (2019), voices inherently reflect individuals' unique anatomical, physiological, and psychological traits. Moss Erickson (2022) adds that the brain shapes vocal expression through motor learning and feedback mechanisms. Drawing on those researchers, and on Moore (2002), Smith and Chipman (2007), O'Bryan (2015) and Blackburn's (2020) perspectives explored above, my definition of vocal authenticity is as follows.

Voice authenticity considers the physical, physiological, and neurological components integral to our voice, brain, and body, as these factors inevitably shape the sound. This physical framework, which delineates our voice, serves as a means to express our identity. Our identity is influenced and constructed through various factors, including our background, culture, social engagement, values, and beliefs. Voice authenticity also recognises the physiological and physical transformations, alongside shifts in values and beliefs, that occur over time. Voice authenticity is attained when one's vocal expression is congruent with their present emotional, physical, and psychological states, functioning as a dynamic aspect of an ongoing process. This remains true even when one is engaged in the act of interpretation while performing a song. Ultimately, perhaps the singer alone can deem whether their voice feels authentic.

PART 2 - Identifying barriers

‘The others’: judgement as a barrier

Brosseau (2019) defines singing as a ‘risk-taking, exposing of the self, expression of the intimate’ (p. 115). This characterisation implies that singers become vulnerable to others’ viewpoints (Anderson, 2009), thereby creating an environment in which they may be subject to critique and evaluation. One form this judgment may take is categorisation, which can reinforce barriers to authenticity. Voice classifications as categorisations, for instance, may foster a sense of division, which can pressure singers to conform to expected roles, as stereotypes are prevalent in the realm of singing, as explored below, potentially distancing them from their authentic vocal identity. Tajfel and Turner’s (2004) social identity theory (SIT) may explain this division. People categorise themselves and others into groups (e.g. teachers, choir members). Discrimination among groups contributes to a positive social identity (p. 286), which boosts self-esteem but cultivates division.

Sweet and Parker (2019) note the competitive dynamic among different voice types within choral settings. In their study, one of the participants discusses the common assumption that sopranos represent an aspirational goal for female singers, positing that the ability to sing higher is regarded as preferable. Perhaps vocal aesthetics idealising higher vocal ranges may encounter similar issues to conventional beauty standards represented in Western culture media, such as thinness or muscularity (Ridley et al., 2022). Anecdotally, the majority of renowned arias in classical singing are typically performed by sopranos or tenors, with only occasional contributions from very deep basses. A comparable trend is observed in popular music, where audiences generally express greater admiration for higher, belted notes, regardless of gender. This observation is supported by online mainstream sources such as the Classic FM website and social media platforms like Reddit. If the idealised voice types reflect unattainable standards, singers whose voice classification, inherently linked to personal physiology (Cotton, 2007) do not match this ideal, may feel alienated from their own sound, over-

adapt and mask their true vocal identity, or feel pressure to 'correct' what is unchangeable, as range or timbre. This links back to SIT (Tajfel and Turner, 2004), which discusses how individuals internalise group norms and evaluations. This may elucidate why vocalists sometimes try on voices that do not suit them: doing so becomes a means of aligning with group norms to maintain a sense of belonging and social value, even if it distances them from their authentic voice. Linking this to this assignment's definition for authenticity, this would mean no congruence with their anatomical state.

Gendered stereotypes are also perpetuated, manifested in both conscious and unconscious forms. Denison and Denison (2019) highlight that conscious stereotypes often involve ridiculing boys' voices when perceived as too high-pitched. They also note a pervasive belief that high singing is intrinsically linked to gender (p. 33), which other research on voice linked to identity concur with (Podesva and Callier, 2015; Eidsheim, 2019; Blackburn, 2020; Clark, 2024). According to Chong, Choi, and Lee (2022), unconscious stereotypes can significantly impact perceptions of attractiveness, particularly in relation to vocal characteristics such as volume and pitch: men typically associate softer voices in women with femininity, whereas women tend to perceive men with louder voices as embodying masculinity. If we consciously or unconsciously attempt to match these gendered stereotypes, we may hinder vocal authenticity by aligning with societal expectations and the group's vocal standards. Self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), which distinguishes between 'who we are' and 'expectations', may explain the feeling of inauthenticity: there is a discrepancy between our actual sound and how we believe we ought to sound/what we perceive others think we ought to sound like.

Moreover, even if a voice matches a culture's attractiveness stereotypes, singers may still find their voices deemed 'inauthentic' by listeners, who act as a judgmental external factor. The listener is not immutable: opinions change depending on who listens. Blackburn (2020) shows that some listeners praise Lana Del Rey's honest tone, whereas journalist Robinson associates it with inauthenticity. Consequently, it is evident that singers will invariably face judgment, underscoring the notion of 'risk-taking'

articulated by Brousseau (2019). Therefore, listeners' expectations, as representations of 'the other,' can influence vocal choices and prevent access to authenticity. The term 'choices' is invoked here for the multiplicity of selves humans may possess (James, 1890). Although singers may possess the ability to embrace various styles, they often are pressured to select one. Failing to do so could lead to their artistic expressions being viewed as inauthentic (Van Leeuwen, 2001). Consequently, singers may be compelled to conform to a singular identity, which may not be congruent with this assignment's definition and with the concept of vocal ontogenesis (Blackburn, 2020), which states that the voice is subject to continual transformation. Pedagogically, this suggests that we could first help aspiring professional singers understand the realities of the entertainment industry. Concurrently, teachers may invite them to explore practical solutions for expressing all their identities, such as having multiple artist names or bands. For amateurs, we can encourage exploration of various sounds and styles, allowing them to uncover their preferred voices rather than those of the listener.

It is essential to recognise that the 'others as a barrier' is not solely brought by voluntary negativity. The caring listener can also prevent authentic vocal expression. This occurs when feedback, although genuinely positive, is perceived as insincere by the singer, thereby undermining their authenticity. In a study conducted by Sweet (2018), three participants experienced a decline in self-confidence regarding their vocal abilities. This occurred after they watched a televised singing competition, in which a singer with subpar vocal skills received enthusiastic praise from their loved ones. This situation led them to question the validity of the compliments they had received themselves. Therefore, it may be beneficial to educate parents of minor students on how to provide healthy feedback, and to educate students of all ages on how to improve agency and express their feelings and needs to loved ones regarding feedback.

The singer as a barrier

Singers' ruminations ultimately do not contribute positively to their development, possibly undermining voice authenticity.

Turpin (2022) discusses the feelings of alienation expressed by a participant. According to her, such feelings may contribute to a predisposition towards perfectionism in singing, as it involves presenting oneself as a flawless singer. Additionally, she notes that singers often compare themselves to one another. This demonstrates that while singers might feel alienated from non-singers, they still evaluate themselves against other singers, potentially exacerbating this perfectionist tendency. Perfectionism may be the reason why self-consciousness sometimes prevents vocalists from trying new sounds, as those are related (Stoeber, Kober and Tanno, 2012). Anderson (2009) concurs with the concept of singers' self-judgment. She highlights how the self-consciousness of her case-study student even prevented her from doing simple vocalisations. Here, perfectionism and self-consciousness are barriers inhibiting singers from their own sound, therefore preventing singers from reaching a free expression. One could argue that the definition of authenticity I crafted addresses congruency with internal states. While a shy-sounding voice may be authentic to a singer's current internal state, self-consciousness can still be considered a barrier when it inhibits access to other authentic selves, accessing a full voice potential, like the concept of multiple identities (O'Bryan, 2015) and vocal ontogenesis (Blackburn, 2020) let us believe.

While the previous section examined the external influence of social expectations on vocal standards, highlighting the tendency to regard specific classifications as inherently superior, this paragraph turns its focus to the internalisation of these ideals *by* singers, therefore resulting in an inner conflict. O'Bryan (2015) provides a testimonial from a singer who once disliked their sound: she explains how this stems from personal conflicts and beliefs about beauty in the voice. Internal conflict on voice attractivity is supported by Sweet and Parker (2019) in their discussion of voice classification, which 'sometimes clashed with participants' self-perception' (p. 71). Although classifications aim to provide a stable framework for vocal work (Bozeman, 2013), they may paradoxically create confusion and become harmful when they create an illusion of objectivity (i.e. a higher voice is desirable), when authenticity is subjective.

Perhaps a good way to overcome perfectionism, self-consciousness and inner conflicts is through improvisation, as experienced by La Roche (2021), who advocates for

improvisation as a path to acceptance, letting go of expectations and embracing the liberty of expression. This can be easily implemented in the singing studio. Improvisation decentres judgment (La Roche), broadens the interpretation of 'success', and fosters alternative perspectives regarding the musician's identity (Burnard, 2000). This process enables students to explore uncharted territories void of predefined voices to imitate; therefore, the notion of right and wrong is absent. With no voice to mimic, and within a new musical context, each voice emerges authentically. While this approach has proven effective for several of my students, it has not resonated with those who felt overwhelmed by the concept, underscoring its unsuitability for certain individuals, highlighting the need for student-centred approaches. This method aligns with a subjectivist perspective, in which authenticity is perceived as something that develops organically rather than being imposed from outside.

The social group before the individual: examining choirs

As articulated in Part 1, the 'group' within the context of a choir provides support, particularly during challenging periods for singers, such as during adolescents' vocal changes (Denison and Denison, 2019). Clift and Hancox (2001) concur and view choirs as a means of fostering social interactions that are beneficial for mental health. However, this can sometimes come at the expense of singers' individualities. Many papers argue that choirs stifle individuality in singers. O'Toole (2005) authored a critical paper reflecting on her personal experiences with choirs, arguing that significant reforms are necessary in choral pedagogy. She contends that the current approach primarily emphasises the production of compliant singers, often neglecting the individuals themselves, with a greater focus on the music rather than the singers' development. Denison and Denison also balance their perspective and recognise how choirs can be a place where vocal identities are silenced, aligning with O'Toole, who critiques the inherent demand for uniformity. While it may be assumed that various activities (e.g., private sessions and choir practice) could help meet singers' vocal identity needs, research conducted by Sweet and Parker (2019) indicates that this may

lead to confusion about the desired vocal outcome, hinder their progress, and complicate their practice. A solution may be to require choir directors and private teachers to communicate with each other on each student's needs, thereby alleviating confusion over practice and voice identity.

This phenomenon, in which the group takes precedence over the singers, has been the focus of limited research. Sweet (2018), in her study of adolescent females in choirs, aligns with emerging testimonials, stating that choirs do not necessarily bring positive experiences, as the emphasis on the 'group' often overshadows individual identities. A subsequent study she conducted with Parker (2019) confirmed this sentiment among female participants, indicating that the primary focus of choir teachers was predominantly on the ensemble. This sometimes led to frustration, as the ensemble's needs were prioritised over the individuality of the singers, which in turn fostered feelings of guilt for not being good enough for the choir. This raises the question of whether this also applies to male choristers. The existing literature on this topic predominantly concentrates on female singers, while discussions regarding males typically address the phenomenon of voice change and often neglect the impact of group dynamics on individual experiences. Freer (2006) offers a personal insight, stating that his voice was literally silenced during voice change, as he was instructed to 'stand in the back of the choir and mouth the words' (p. 73). In a later study, Freer (2022) included narratives from boys who expressed a desire to move out of the shadows of the choir and be heard as individuals. While the study centres on vocal health during adolescence, it also uncovers deeper issues of identity and belonging. The concept of the multiplicity of selves (James, 1890) may help balance group dynamics with individual authenticity. Presenting it to students may enable them to learn more about themselves and to balance the identities they use in choir with those they employ when singing solo. This would underscore that, even when the focus is on the group, their individuality and authentic voice are valued.

What the choir issue highlights: pedagogical environment and teaching style

This exploration of the duality of the choir in the reviewed literature highlights pedagogical issues hindering singers' access to authenticity.

Firstly, the teacher's position may be perceived as superior to the student's rather than one of equality. While role differentiation is a common aspect in educational settings (Bull, 2021), this hierarchical framework presents potential challenges. Sweet and Parker (2019) argue that, while some students admire choral teachers, as they foster the joy of being involved in the ensemble, the desire to please the influential figure may also inadvertently suppress the singers' personal needs and perspectives. Economidou Stavrou (2022) agrees that many students place a high value on a personal and caring relationship with their music teachers, which they connect to positive experiences of support and trust. While the study concentrates on classroom contexts, this emphasis on interpersonal connection may also resonate with students taking private lessons. Sweet (2018) discusses advocacy, noting that participants expressed a desire for greater accountability towards the teacher regarding their well-being. They often felt uncomfortable singing high notes, but did so to please their teacher. In the framework of Freire's (1970) pedagogy, education should foster critical consciousness and empower learners to transform their surroundings. Power may prevent critical reflection and authentic voice: students adapt instead of expressing themselves. Learners may not even dare to question their relationship with the teacher, viewing them, as Freire would say, as a messenger for the 'banking concept of education' (p. 72), where the teacher only deposits knowledge. In this context, a dialogic, empowering teacher could remove this barrier.

Drawing on Sweet and Parker (2019), I believe our role as voice educators is to foster self-advocacy, embrace imperfections as proposed by La Roche (2021), and encourage experimentation in singing. Such practices could facilitate significant personal discoveries, as noted by Anderson (2009). Regrettably, choirs have faced criticism for their inability to facilitate such explorations. Sweet and Parker reference the work of Thurman and Welch (2000), who indicate that numerous choral compositions impose

limitations on the range and volume of young vocalists, thereby diminishing their opportunities to explore their vocal capacities, and perhaps vocal identities. Furthermore, Sweet's (2018) study corroborated this assertion, where participants reported that they refrained from singing notes 'outside of [their] assigned voice part' (p. 142). Consequently, it seems essential for teachers and choral composers to acknowledge the heightened potential of their singers. Rather than limiting themselves to mere exploration, they may uncover what resonates authentically with them or perhaps reveal one of the multiple identities discussed by O'Bryan (2015).

Future recommendations

In alignment with the perspectives of Denison and Denison (2019), advocating for educators to cultivate a repertoire that is 'adaptable, appropriate, and appreciated' (p. 34) may help singing students overcome the explored barriers. In the context of private sessions, this process is facilitated, as students often have the opportunity to suggest songs themselves, which is even favourable for motivation in class (Renwick and McPherson, 2002).

Sweet and Parker (2019) suggest that experimentation is beneficial and can raise 'more dimensionalized and versatile vocal identities' (p. 72), aligning with James (1890) and O'Bryan's (2015) perspectives on multiple identities. Creating space for experimentation fosters opportunities for identities and the emergence of diverse authenticities (La Roche, 2021). In the studio, this could take the form of improvisation, new repertoire or playful singing.

Reading Sweet and Parker's (2019) provided valuable insights into the significance of a personalised approach in teaching. Their findings indicate that identical advice may yield contrasting outcomes—either detrimental or beneficial—depending on the singers involved. This study also highlighted issues arising from inadequate communication in choir environments, as well as in some private music practices (Hughes, 2005).

Therefore, it seems essential to cultivate a more effective model of dialogue and co-

constructed communication within the singing studio. This approach resonates with Sweet's (2018) research, which advocates for promoting self-advocacy among students. Such a model could facilitate an environment where students are empowered to articulate their needs and emotions with clarity. This aligns with Anderson's (2009) case study, where the student clearly communicated that the teacher's actions, although intended to help, were inhibiting her from singing and experiencing her true voice.

I would also recommend extreme kindness, as, as Peter Pears said: 'a singer is a person' (p. 34, cited in Kemp, 1981). This emphasises that a singer's voice is intrinsically linked to all aspects of its owner. Teachers who prioritise personal agendas and fail to adopt a student-centred approach do not, in my opinion, foster an environment conducive to exploring the unique physiology (Zhang, 2016) of each individual's voice.

Future research could benefit from further qualitative studies, as they facilitate a deeper understanding of individuals' backgrounds (Creswell, 2016), given the current limited knowledge regarding authenticity in the singing voice. Additionally, employing mixed methods may allow for a larger participant sample, thereby enabling findings to be more broadly applicable, even if maintaining a student-centred approach may remain a priority.

The extremely subjective nature of the topic, the breadth of definitions, and paradoxically, the limited number of papers on the subject, bring limitations to this assignment. One of the challenges that limited my review has been exploring a broad subject from a subject-centred perspective. This required me to identify patterns, concepts, and tensions in order to generate a new pedagogical understanding. For instance, the need to use dialogue and open communication as described above may be essential in understanding which path a student wishes to vocally explore, as the topic is so subjective. This may be an opportunity to use subjectivity as a powerful tool for connection with a student, rather than a limitation. This may help the teacher understand what authenticity means to the student, and help find ways to achieve it, be

it through dialogue, improvisation, or even education about obsolete models of voice attractiveness.

Conclusion

I aimed to first understand how vocal authenticity is conceptualised in the literature and identify which barriers limit singers' access to more authentic vocal expression. This review has deepened my awareness of how pedagogical structures can either foster or hinder authenticity, a topic that directly affects my own studio practice.

My understanding has evolved to recognise that judgment in the realm of singing is omnipresent, originating from ourselves (Anderson, 2009), others (Denison and Denison, 2019), and the social group (Eidsheim, 2019). Additionally, it comes from outsiders (Moore, 2002) for professional artists, who often face a degree of public exposure when singing.

Research reveals varying definitions for authenticity, underscoring its inherently subjective nature. Authenticity as interpreted through an authenticator and their perspective (Van Leeuwen, 2001; Moore, 2002), such as a peer or a group, comes with the concept of external judgement. This may be internalised by singers and affect authentic self-expression, as they may adapt to what is perceived as valuable in order to be seen as a valuable group member (Tajfel and Turner, 2004). This explains how, while voices are shaped by their social surroundings (Eidsheim, 2019), beneficial in shaping vocal identity, in a choir (Sweet and Parker, 2019), the dominant peer values may override individual identity and authenticity.

Authenticity of the singing voice is only truly defined from the perspective of the one who sings, at least according to the definition formulated in this assignment. This notion would carry significant implications for the singing studio: as teachers, we could foster an environment that encourages greater accountability among singers (Sweet, 2018). This can be achieved through student-centred teaching and open communication, which could be explored further in research as part of the MA. Such an environment may help

students promote heightened awareness of their identities, or their multiplicity of identities (O'Bryan, 2015), enabling them to articulate these identities through their vocal expression. Ultimately, what seems to matter most is not the search for a singular or fixed vocal truth but the ongoing creation of safe and curious spaces where various forms of vocal identities can be met without judgment.

Critical reflection

As I require a clear framework to work efficiently, I was initially drawn to Gibbs' (1988) model, which provides a structured approach. However, I also need sufficient word count to allow for depth and analysis. The limited word count and Fallin's (2021) critique of Gibbs' model for producing shallow reflections led me to opt for the Rolfe, Freshwater, and Jasper (2001) model instead, which allows for a deeper exploration. The dilemma I encountered in selecting an appropriate model for critical reflection serves as an analogy for my experience throughout the assignment process. In the assignment, to address the challenge of balancing clarity versus depth in reflection, I clarified my definition of authenticity at the end of Part 1. Here, I utilised the University of Cumbria's document (2016), which provides questions to address in each section.

What?

My chosen subject was the broad field (Moore, 2002) of voice authenticity. This holds significant relevance to my professional practice: having recently relocated to a different country, I was compelled to reconstruct my voice studio from the ground up. This made me question which students I deeply want to work with. I found I prefer collaborating with introspective individuals who wish to genuinely and honestly express themselves.

While I have consistently sensed a significant connection between a voice and its owner, I adopted an outsider's perspective for this assignment, due to my prior lack of research on the subject. My aim was to examine the topic through a lens of curiosity and remain open to potential surprises, as Dewey (1909) suggests, when engaging with the literature. After reviewing materials related to voice and authenticity, I excluded studies on speaking voice to maintain focus. I directed my attention to the singing voice and, similar to a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), organised my findings first by definitions and subsequently by the challenges associated with accessing authenticity. Subthemes attached to each section became subheadings. The

subheadings later influenced my perception in practice: I changed how I appreciated each student's voice, wondering how their culture, self-perception, or previous teachers shaped their view of their own voice authenticity. Although this has not yet led to practical actions, my thinking framework during lessons has evolved.

As I read, I realised few researchers addressed authenticity in the *singing* voice. I focused on relevant non-peer-reviewed theses (Anderson, 2009; Lemon-McMahon, 2019; La Roche, 2021; White, 2021; Turpin, 2022) and examined their bibliographies, uncovering pertinent, credible peer-reviewed papers (Kelly, Sadeghieh and Khosrow Adeli, 2014). Once the research question was crafted, it remained unchanged and served as a key reference throughout the assignment.

So what?

The process made me realise that after a year and a half in the Master's program, I had become somewhat condescending towards my sources, disregarding grey literature in academic work simply because of their non-peer-reviewed nature. This was perhaps hypocritical, given how strongly I strive to adopt a non-judgmental attitude in my work with students. The lecture on grey literature refined my perspective, which was beneficial, as many of the peer-reviewed articles and essential books I found on my topic were mainly located in doctoral theses. I realised I was experiencing a phase described by Kruger and Dunning (1999), where insufficient knowledge breeds unwarranted confidence—termed a 'dual burden' (p. 1121) of incompetence and unawareness. This made me realise that approaching academic sources with the same curiosity I bring to my students would enhance both my teaching and my scholarship.

The topic was unhelpful in avoiding digressions, which does not ease my inherent struggle with structure, particularly given its philosophical nature (e.g., what is authenticity?). I have tugged at numerous questions concerning 'identity' and the degree to which an individual perceives a connection to their voice, to their identity, and the interplay between those notions. I desperately tried to respond to each of them. To

mitigate this, following Booth, Colomb, and Williams' (2003) guidance, I ensured that I had a plan early on, while remaining open to revisions. I also journaled, which proved to be particularly beneficial (Meyer and Willis, 2018).

I fear I have taken a somewhat simplistic approach to defining authenticity (e.g. 'perhaps the singer alone can deem whether their voice feels authentic'), as it is an argument that prevails over every other, as long as subjectivity is given significance. Although this statement may appear to lack a definitive stance, it accurately represents *my* perspective. I wish students would also take responsibility to share *their* views on *their* definition of authenticity. This prompts the question of the role of educators in facilitating accountability among singers, thereby empowering them to identify moments of authenticity in their vocal expression. I was pleased to read that research, such as Sweet's (2018), advocates for self-agency in singers.

Throughout the past year, I have pursued personal development to overcome people-pleasing tendencies, particularly in musicianship. Engaging with authors like Moore (2002) and Blackburn (2020) clarified the impossibility of being universally loved. This led me to reconsider my perspective, suggesting that an inward focus may be more beneficial than an outward one in artistic endeavours. This raised questions regarding how I, as a practitioner, can help my students take greater pride in their artistic choices, provided they are aware of all the healthy and effective vocal techniques and artistic options available to them. If the first step, as defined in the previous paragraph, is helping students articulate what authenticity means to them, the next is fostering the confidence to act on it. In my practice, I intuitively encouraged students to make decisions before soliciting feedback, whilst still offering it when requested. Sweet and Parker's (2019) study heightened my awareness of how this may help develop self-agency in students. Thus, following this assignment, I now emphasise even more that I am merely one of their listeners.

As a dedicated practitioner, I have been experiencing an extended period of uncertainty for three years. According to Kruger and Dunning (1999), individuals who are competent often tend to underestimate their capabilities; when I teach, I emphasise that future

research may identify more effective methodologies for singing, which could render my pedagogical approaches obsolete. In light of this, subjective matters such as ‘finding authenticity’ do not help. My goal is to regain a stable positionality that allows me to articulate my views confidently, despite the inherent impossibility of achieving absolute certainty.

Now what?

While engaging with literature and writing for this assignment occasionally led me to feel torn in multiple directions and somewhat disoriented, it also offered practical strategies that I could apply in my private practice.

In alignment with Hughes (2005), who emphasises the significance of effective interaction models in teaching, I aim to focus on dialogic strategies in private sessions. Inspired by Sweet’s (2018) and Sweet and Parker’s (2019) recommendations to enhance communication and students’ self-agency, I plan to initiate discussions with students regarding their relationship with their voice and how aligned they feel with it. This will enable me to determine whether this is something students are genuinely interested in, ensuring I do not waste their lesson time on something of no value to them. This dialogic interaction is especially relevant to my interest in voice authenticity, as it decentralises authority (Freire, 1970)—which can act as a barrier to authenticity—, and encourages expression. Furthermore, I will focus on Voice Study Centre’s library short courses on student-centred approaches.

I anticipate that this approach will enhance my relationship with students, leading to improved classes. On a more practical note, perhaps it will help attract more students as a new teacher in the city through referrals.

Although it was not my primary focus, this study has highlighted both the impact of change in adolescents’ voices (Freer, 2006; Sweet, 2018; Sweet and Parker, 2019) and the literature on hormonal influences on vocal development, which continues even after

puberty (Afsah, 2024). This sparked my interest, prompting me to conduct further research on this topic.

I now feel better equipped to open the floor to address identity and authenticity in expression and interpretation in the singing studio, with curiosity, openness, and a renewed awareness of each student's unique vocal journey.

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