

May 2014

# Singer Identity in Adolescence

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# SINGER IDENTITY IN ADOLESCENCE

by

Trinny Schumann

A Thesis Submitted in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Music

at

The University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee

May 2014

# **ABSTRACT**

## **SINGER IDENTITY IN ADOLESCENCE**

by

Trinny Schumann

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee 2014  
Under the supervision of Associate Professor Sheila Feay-Shaw

There is a prevalent and growing trend of adults labeling themselves as non-singers. This crisis of singer identity becomes a factor as music education programs strive to promote singing, especially community singing. This qualitative research study addressed the self-perceptions of singing identity, ability, and attitudes in adolescents. The purpose of this study was to investigate how adolescent students view their own singing abilities in order to gain insight and understanding about what factors play an important role in the shaping of views about their own singing identity. Previous studies shaped the framework for this investigation. Studies reviewed included: (1) the prevalence of inaccurate self-labeling of non-singers in adults; (2) attribution theories; and (3) adolescent views. A 10-question survey was designed and given to students (N=98) from a suburban K-8 school in the Midwest to understand attitudes about singing, opinions of identity as a singer, whether it is a learned behavior or a natural talent, and how those ideas developed. The analysis of the initial survey responses provided information used to design the interview questions for the six case studies. These six participants provided perspectives on singer identity in adolescence. Five themes emerged from the study which include: (1) Reasons for singing; (2) Nature of singing

ability; (3) Vocabulary/lack of vocabulary; (4) Confidence/lack of confidence; and (5) Formations of opinions. Findings aligned with past studies showing that adolescence is a notable time when people develop their singing identity, but new ideas were revealed. Adolescents have all levels of vocal ability and music educators have the opportunity to guide students through a continuum of singing development. Music teachers should be aware of the concept of singer identity and find ways to improve singer confidence. Fear and anxiety over singing ability should be addressed as normal rather than as an indicator of singing potential. Helping students to have vocabulary to describe their voice, their ability level, and ways to improve their voice will empower them to see themselves as singers.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Singing in this country has been on the decline for the last several decades. Although over 23 million people still participate weekly in some form of choral enjoyment there have been campaigns and attempts to reinvigorate singing in U.S. society. *Get America singing...again!* (1996), was a Music Educators National Conference (MENC) initiative to reinvigorate community singing across the country. The campaign pulled together representatives from the American Choral Directors Association, Chorus America, Sweet Adelines International, Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barbershop Singing in America (SPEBSQSA) and members of MENC to discuss singing in the United States. This campaign had two main objectives. The first objective was to collect and agree on standard songs that every one in the United States should know. The second objective was to promote community singing.

There is, however, a very prevalent trend in adults labeling themselves as non-singers. As a music teacher, I often hear people I that I meet say “oh I can’t sing”, “I am tone-deaf” or, “I am not a singer”. This identity crisis for singers must be addressed in order for individuals and cultural groups in the United States to remain a singing society.

This qualitative research study addressed the self-perceptions of singing identity, ability, and attitude in adolescents. The purpose of this study was to investigate through interviews, observations, and surveys the views and attitudes adolescents have about their own singing and what factors played a role in these developing beliefs. The studies in the review of literature represent the most relevant and recent research on music identity, attitudes, motivation, and singing. The literature review is divided into the following

three main sections: (a) The general populations belief about singing and non-singing in regards to amusia; (b) attribution and motivation theory in relation to music; and (c) adolescent views of music making.

## **Review of Literature**

The studies included in this literature review help to reveal underlying ideology of vocal quality and perception that has been assessed in various studies in recent years. Since the voice is such a personal instrument, individual identity and the relationship to musical identity has been investigated. Studies on adolescent beliefs about musical ability, musical identity, and musical effort help to illuminate a gap in research on adolescent singer identity.

### **Singing and Non-Singing**

It is important to identify the prevalence of true tone-deafness compared to the number of adults self-labeling themselves as tone-deaf or non-singers. Cuddy, Balkwill, Peretz, & Holden (2005) reported that of 2000 first year university students, 17% of the participants in their study labeled themselves as tone deaf. One hundred of these participants were given the Montreal Battery of Evaluation of Amusia (MBEA) to determine the accuracy of this common label of tone deafness, scientifically known as amusia. Only four of the participants scored low enough to be considered having amusia. This study indicates that self-reports of tone deafness are not a reliable indicator of musical deficit.

Sloboda, Wise, and Peretz (2005) suggest a term of 'false amusia' to discuss the prevalence of the inaccurate self-labeling of tone deafness. This qualitative study set out to answer two questions: 1) What do people mean when they label themselves tone-deaf



and 2) what can these self-labeled tone deaf individuals do and not do. The researchers used the revised MBEA to investigate their questions. The authors discovered a disconnect between what the MBEA proposes to test (perception) and how the participants described their problem. The researchers described the label not as a musical perception issue, but rather a musical production issue (“I can’t sing”). Peretz, Cummings, & Dube (2007) reported that amusia affects approximately 4% of the general population. It is important to understand and address the fact that many adults are incorrectly labeling themselves as tone-deaf, non-singers, or nonmusical.

Abril (2007) did a case study of three pre-service general elementary teachers enrolled in their state required university music class. Each of these three case studies revealed factors that contributed to the participants’ anxiety and self-labeling as non-singers. Among the factors contributing to the individual perceptions were (a) past music experiences (b) family involvement and (c) positive and negative memories of school music. The author notes that teachers should offer ways to assist singer development rather than pass judgment on production.

Another similar study by Ruddock & Leong (2004) researched self-judgment of self-declared unmusical adults. This case study looked closely at four adults who have labeled themselves as non-musicians for their definitions of ‘musical’, contributing factors and the impact of this on musical participation. The four personal stories revealed that participants’ past failures and self-verdicts contributed to their self-labeling as non-singers.

A further study looked at twelve self-declared non-singers (Whidden, 2009). Whidden uncovered three reasons for self-labeling of non-singers: (a) comparing

themselves to others who appeared to have musical talent (b) not considering a musical spectrum of ability and (c) receiving negative feedback when they attempted to sing.

Each of the stories had a theme based on childhood experiences involving an emotional response, a specific moment or person, internalization of the experience, and a belief in the authority or experience.

An additional study looked at perceptions and attitudes of self-proclaimed adult non-singers (N=42) (Wheaton, 1998). In this study, these individuals were interviewed, their vocal skills self-evaluated, evaluated by the researchers, and by an independent evaluator. It was determined that the researcher and the third evaluator rated the vocal skills higher than the self-evaluations. The majority of the participants surveyed enjoyed singing when no one was listening, but did not feel like they were good enough to participate in singing.

Stephens (2012) research into singer perceptions and self labeled singers and non-singers provides grounding for this current study. Stephens coined a term *singer identity* as a person's singing self-image. Participants (N=170) were undergraduate students enrolled in either a psychology course or a music appreciation course. The majority of participants identified themselves as non-singers and a large number identified themselves as tone-deaf (61%). These students all were between the ages of 18-26. Most of these self-labeled non-singers formed that identity in their adolescence. Furthermore this study investigated confidence and comfort levels of these participants. Many participant's claimed an average confidence level or singing self-efficacy, while only 36 participants had low confidence scores. Despite the fact that many of these students

labeled themselves non-singers, they reported having a positive or very positive attitude toward singing. Many reported singing on a daily basis (n=99).

The research suggests that there are many people in the general population who have an inaccurate, poor singer identity. This may explain why many adults choose to avoid singing all together. The research demonstrates the impact poor singer identity has on singing participation (Abril, 2007; Cuddy et al., 2005; Ruddock & Leong, 2004; Sloboda et al., 2005; Wheaton, 1998; Whidden, 2008b)

### Attribution Theory

According to attribution theory, there are four main ways to explain how students define their success and failures: luck, effort, ability and task difficulty (Peterson, 2002). Luck and task difficulty are viewed as external attributes, while effort and ability are seen as internal. In addition, causality under attribution theory can also be looked at as stable or unstable. For example, luck and effort are unstable, meaning they can change and fluctuate. In comparison, ability and task difficulty are looked at as unchanged or stable.

Attribution Theory began to develop in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in the 1980's researchers started to apply attribution theory to academic achievement. A study regarding causal beliefs about success and failure in music showed that students place more importance on ability than effort (Legette, 1998). This would help explain why many adults who have had a bad experience with singing end up labeling themselves as non-singers. Moore, Burland, & Davidson (2003) conducted a study with 257 children to explore what factors are important in students' success. His research looked at the influences of parents, teachers, schools, peers, and friends. The author suggests that starting music lessons early, having parental support, and having a friendly teacher were critical to student's future motivation to participate in music. Vispoel & Austin (1998)

studied to what adolescents attribute success and failure in music. In their findings, they suggest that adolescents do not attribute success to the same factors as younger children. The authors suggest that music practitioners should be more aware of students' attributional beliefs and encourage students to look at the role that more controllable factors play in success.

### Adolescent Views of Music Making

In designing a qualitative study with adolescents to identify perceptions about their own singing, it is important to look at similar studies regarding adolescent's general attitudes towards music and their abilities. Wayman (2004) conducted a qualitative study to look at how three middle school students view their general music experiences. Three themes emerged (a) music class is fun, less serious than other classes, providing a release of tension and boredom (b) some students are more talented than others and music education is more important for the talented, and (c) the primary purpose of music in society is for entertainment, where the average person listens to music but does not perform.

Another study explored what made music "meaningful" to adolescents (Davis, 2009). Participant responses (N=178) concerning the importance of music class were used to develop the Music Meaning Survey (MMS). Following pilot test and revisions, it was given to sixth through eighth grade students (N=762) in middle schools from a state in each of the six MENC divisions. The study revealed that the students found meaning in a variety of ways and the researcher was able to group them into four categories: Vocational, Academic, Belongingness, and Agency.

Boswell (1991) conducted a quantitative study investigating variables contributing to student attitude about general music. Students (N=394) were given the Music Attitude Inventory (MAI) and the Music Class Attitude Index (MCAI). Data was collected on specific types of music activities in which adolescents like to participate. The results showed that students understand the material, put forth effort and feel they are treated equally.

Phillips (2003) conducted a quantitative study (N=2180) to find contributing factors to adolescent attitudes toward music. Variance in music attitude could be attributed to background and self-concept. The study showed a slight decrease in positive music attitude as grade level increased. Low socio-economic status, poor home musical environment, and low self-concept impacted music attitude negatively.

Freer (2009) conducted a study with six boys regarding their experiences in school choral music programs to look at what is important, meaningful, and relevant to adolescents. Mills (2010) looked at musical identity and the adolescent singer. This qualitative study of adolescents' perceptions of musical identity, focused on six singers involved in a community children's choir. A similar qualitative study looked at eighteen adolescent choral singers from three large Arizona schools and their philosophical beliefs about music making (Parker, 2011). Four themes emerged: (a) Music-making as a simultaneously 'feelingful' experience (b) Musical knowing as interpersonal knowing (c) Expressed music as expressed feeling and (d) Music-making as enlightening.

After looking at the studies of the general populations belief about singing and non-singing in regards to amusia many of the self-labeling non-singers identified adolescence as the time they formed their belief about their singing (Abril, 2007;

Ruddock & Leong's, 2004; Whidden, 2009). In studies on attribution and motivation theory in relation to music, it was found that adolescence was the period success and failure was established (Asmus, 1986; Legette, 1998; Vispoel & Austin, 1998). Finally after looking at adolescent views of music making, the studies suggest that this is a time when students are very aware of their own learning about the meaning of music and the value of it (Boswell, 1991; Davis, 2009; Freer, 2009; Mills 2010; Parker, 2011; Phillips, 2003; Wayman, 2004). There is a gap in the research about singer identity in adolescence which provides an opening for the current study.

This study investigated how adolescent students view their own singing abilities, in order to gain insight and understanding about what factors play an important role in the shaping of adolescent views about their own singing identity. Although there is literature available on how adults shaped their singing identity and studies on adolescent views towards music experience, this study is important to understand the developing adolescent's perspective and understanding of their own singing ability.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Methodology

A qualitative approach, including a survey and interview format, was used for this study. The students that participated were from a suburban K-8 school in the Midwest. This study included an initial survey as a warm up design (Janescik, 1994). The initial survey was given to the entire middle school student population (N=98) from the participating school during their band, orchestra, choir, or general music class period. The students' names were removed from the survey and an identifying code assigned to assist with selection of the individual case study participants. The ten questions for the survey are below.

1. Some people would say that a person is born with a singing voice and others would say you learn to use it. What do you think?
2. Do you think that anyone can learn to sing? Why or why not? Do you think there are people that cannot sing?
3. Would you call yourself a singer? What do you base that idea on?
4. Do you consider yourself a good singer? How do you define that idea? Who is someone else that you would say is a good singer?
5. Have others told you-you are a good singer? Do you know what they were basing that comment on? Did they explain what they meant?
6. Have others told you-you are a bad singer? Do you know what they were basing that comment on? Did they explain what they meant?
7. Do you sing now? Is it in a formal group or something you do for your own enjoyment?
8. Would you say that you like to sing? Why or why not?
9. Is singing something that you would like to better at? If so, what would that mean to you?
10. When do you think you formed your opinion about your singing voice? And what do you think brought you to that idea?

The analysis of the initial survey responses provided information used to design the interview questions for the case studies (Stake, 1994). Twelve surveys were identified as having revealing comments about singing across the questions and selected as potential subjects for further consideration. A variety of opinions were represented on

several of the questions to create a balanced group. I looked for students that believed singing was a born talent, some who thought it was a learned skill, and those with mixed opinions. I included both students that called them singers and students that called themselves non-singers. After identifying this group, contact was made with students to request further participation. Six students agreed to be interviewed. Semi-structured interviews were administered to these six adolescent students selected from the original survey respondents. Three of the interviews took place in the art room and three interviews took place in the Music office. The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 45 minutes in length. Individual interviews were audio taped and transcribed. Open coding based on the techniques of Emerson, Fretz & Shaw (1995) was used, and marginal notes were created to find themes across the case study interviews. Data interpretation was based on the techniques of Huberman & Miles (1994).

### **Descriptive Statistics from the Initial Survey**

Student responses from the initial surveys illuminated specific opinions of this group of adolescents in regards to attributes of singing for themselves and others. Responses to question one revealed that 27% of the students said you are born with the ability to sing; 47% said you may be born with ability, but you also learn to sing; and 25% said you learn to sing. Of the respondents who said you are born with the ability to sing, 58% said that anyone can learn to sing. Thirty-five percent of the respondents said anyone can learn to sing, with additional ideas given. Thirty-eight percent said that you are born with the ability to sing, and it is NOT something you can learn, while 8% added that not being able to sing could be the result of a disability.



Respondents who said you may be born with the ability to sing, but you also have to learn, overwhelmingly felt that anyone can learn to sing (78%). Only 18% of the students said that you cannot learn to sing if you are not born with the ability. For those who felt that singing is something that you learn, 92% said anyone can learn to sing, with many adding additional thoughts to their answer.

One of the key questions for this survey was self-identification as a singer. Fifty-eight percent of the students would identify themselves as singers while 34% would not call themselves singers. Within the group who does not consider themselves singers, 44% of those students said they enjoy singing and 16% said they enjoy it sometimes.

Within the group of students who consider themselves singers, 55% would call themselves good singers, 40% would call themselves average to O.K. singers, and 5% would not call themselves good singers. In the students that do not consider themselves singers, there were no students that would call themselves good singers, 21% called themselves average to O.K. singers, 71% would not call themselves good singers, and 6% said they did not know.

During adolescence, the opinions of other people can be highly impactful. When asked if they have ever been told they are a good singer, 68% of the students said yes, 30% said no, and 1% person did not respond. When asked if they have ever been told they are a bad singer, 25% of the students said yes, 74% said no, with one of those students responding, "That would be bullying."

It also seemed important to gain an understanding of the place that singing held currently in the lives of these students. Students were asked if they currently sing: 69% said yes, 9% said sometimes, and 2% said no. When asked if they like to sing, 75% of the

students said yes, 16% said no, and 7% said they like to sing sometimes. It became apparent that singing, in some form, remains an element of many of these students' lives.

In order to explore the idea of quality and development of singing, students were asked if they would like to become better at singing. A majority of students said yes (59%), 34% said no, 5% said sometimes, and 2% said no. These findings need to take into consideration that some students already thought they sing well enough while others do not care to improve.

The final survey question was intended to determine if students could identify when their opinion about singing and their singing voice had been formed. For the purpose of this description, responses were grouped into four categories. Forty percent of those students that responded said they shaped their view recently, within the last year or two (5<sup>th</sup> grade through current age). Twenty-two percent said they shaped it when they were young (up through 4<sup>th</sup> grade) and 17% said they did not know when their opinion was formed. The final group (20 %) listed a specific event in their life with no age range attached: for example "at theater camp", "when my dad told me", and "singing for mass".

### **Summary**

The results of the survey show that more than half of the 98 students identified themselves as singers stating they were good or average. Of the remaining students that did not identify themselves as singers, more than half of those enjoy singing at least some of the time and some identified themselves as average singers. While the results demonstrated that some students believe singing is a born talent, the majority of students believe that becoming a good singer involves learning, even on top of talent. These statistics also showed that many identify a specific event that forms their opinion of singing ability.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **The Stories**

The interviews with the six students revealed unique perspectives on their own singing ability, the singing abilities of others and how those ideas are formed. The experiences of each person created an array of ideas that, together begin to bring into focus issues that have been discussed in previous research and new thoughts yet to unfold.

#### **Two Singers in Their Own Musical World**

The first two stories are of students who considered themselves singers. They were not very concerned with what other people thought about their singing and they believed that singing is something that you can learn. They both have a relationship with the musical experience.

#### **Artemis's Story**

Artemis is a very small 7<sup>th</sup> grade boy whose voice has not yet changed. He spoke very colorfully and gave very creative answers to the questions he was asked. He clearly thinks outside the box, so it would be easy to imagine him doing well in a philosophy class. Artemis has few friends and up until this year, he said he did not have any friends. His answers had great inflection and he appeared to enjoy sharing his viewpoint. The interview took place in the art room since my office was not available. He seemed quite at home when he sat down on the stool next to me smiling.

#### **Beauty Is in the Ears of the Beholder**

The conversation began with Artemis sharing his opinions about singing talent: "Well some people are born with just a naturally beautiful voice; some people have to

work on it a little bit.” He shared that although he believes that everyone can learn to sing, some people are “great singers from the start”. He believes that “people can go to singing classes and they can learn to pitch their voice and [learn] how to make different sounds”. Artemis stated that there are ways you can work on your voice to make it sound better. He also explained that people have different preferences for what they consider a good singer to be.

Artemis commented that everyone can sing, however he made it clear that not everyone is going to love every voice they hear. He stated people’s preferences have to be taken into consideration when judging whether someone can sing or not. He said, “Some people, like an alien, or someone from China, might be a big fan of the really screeching singing, but for other people, it might hurt their ears, so it just depends on what you like.” I am not certain whether he is using Chinese Opera as a comparison or some other musical form that he has heard. Artemis said, “I am not so big of a fan of the screeching”.

Artemis believes that if someone does not think they can sing then that opinion will get in their way and they will not be able to sing. According to him: “Well if they say they can’t sing then they are not going to be able to sing”. Artemis has a strong opinion that people’s voices are fit for certain types of music. When I asked him about what a good singer is, he explained:

As long as their voice is fit for some songs and it is not fit for other songs, depending on the song they are singing it may not sound good to me because their voice doesn’t match the song very well.

He said that people’s voices are good at singing certain types of music, but not others:

“Some people might have trouble singing, for example, Lady Gaga songs rather than

country because their voice is just better tuned to those songs”. He also made it clear that he does not say someone is a bad singer just because he does not like their singing. He cleared that up by saying, “I am not saying they are a bad singer, I am just saying I don’t particularly like the way they sing”. When I asked him what a bad singer is he said, “Someone who doesn’t try. If you are not trying to sing well, then you’re really not going to sing well.”

### **Singing Unleashes a Bigger Self**

When Artemis shared past memories of singing, he told a story from when he was younger. Artemis would have singing competitions with his cousins and he would always win. He did not remember why he won or what they were judging, but that he enjoyed the activities: “I remember having singing competitions in front of the mirror and there was a chair in the hallway”. He did share a more recent experience of singing “Eye of the Tiger” in a 6<sup>th</sup> grade concert: “The 6<sup>th</sup> graders got to organize it and do all the text (lines of dialogue) stuff, got to be the leaders, or they got to be the actors on stage doing little dances.” He used that story to talk about how he sings better in a group than he does alone. He did not sing any solos at the concert. He stated that his voice goes low (range) when he sings alone and “a little bit lighter to more my natural voice” when he sings with others in a group. Artemis does not sing with his friends other than a song he did not want to mention, but this is when he shared with me that he has not really had friends until this year. He has, however, sung with his cousins: “we would have this thing where we will go...well pick...do a song like *1985*. We’ll go back and forth between lines because that’s a really good song for that”. Artemis also was in the school musical last year and explained his experience singing for that: “It just felt really cool just to have all

our voices doing the same thing and it just felt like you were part of something larger”.

Artemis stated that he does not sing with his family, but his mother used to sing to him and he believes that sometimes she sings very well and others times not as well:

I notice sometimes it is amazing, and sometimes less than amazing. I guess it is just she probably has the same kind of voice as me. It's just sometimes you got it and sometimes it's not all the way there.

He also believes his mother got her singing ability from her father. He said, “my mom probably got it from my grandfather that was in a band”. Artemis does not live with his father, although he visits him, and stated that he has never heard his father sing.

Artemis said he enjoys singing. He keeps to himself with his singing and he thinks that he was not born with a lot of talent, but he has to work at it: “I know that I am one of those people that was born with little talent, but I have to work my voice to get it to the right position for each song”. He stated that his voice may go too high or too low at times. He also revealed that his opinion about his voice changes from day to day and that his singing ability changes from day to day. He explained why he likes to sing. He said, “singing just unleashes a bigger self than talking or yelling does. Singing about something, like the birds do, it means more.”

When I recorded Artemis singing *Amazing Grace*, he realized his emotions were judgmental in nature. He stated, “I feel like I am not as good at that song as others... (I was) a little bit shaky cuz I didn't want to mess up the song.” Artemis was very specific about what he heard when I played it back for him:

I notice when I sing this song I kind of go to the euh (describing a sound he made) at the end and I just sort of soften at the end and it's really hard in front and I notice that sometimes I kind of almost get off pitch.

When asked to describe his singing voice, he had no descriptors other than to say, “Well sometimes it kind of fluctuates. Sometimes I think..oh yeah.. I am pretty good at singing, other times I think I am horrible!” (*very dramatic*).

Artemis was a very easy student to interview. He made it clear that people’s preferences play a very important role in judging singing. One person might enjoy a particular voice and not another, but it is entirely up to the listeners’ ears and preferences. Although he believes that all people can learn to sing, he believes that some people are born with more naturally beautiful voices than others, and some have to work a little harder at it. Artemis also believes that a person has to believe in himself to be a good singer; that if someone believes they cannot sing, that will get in the way of getting better. He also believes if you are not going to try to be good at singing you will not be. Artemis also believes that each voice is meant to sing certain types of music, but not necessarily others. He shared stories of singing competitions with his cousins when he was younger. He said he would always win, but he did not remember how they judged. Artemis’ feeling that some days his voice sounds better than others showed that he has developed personal criteria for evaluation even if he is not able to describe his voice in specific ways. He applied this same sense to his singing of *Amazing Grace* and his assessment of singing quality in a group setting over a solo.

### **Xavier’s Story**

Xavier, at first glance, seems like a typical middle school student. At first, it did not seem like he had a lot say, but what he did say ended up being very thoughtful. The music office was not available for the interview because the band director was giving private lessons so Xavier met me in the art room. He was well spoken and articulate.

Xavier believes that singing is a learned skill. He stated:

When you are born, you are not born natural with an amazing singing voice. You kind of learn how to use your voice and how to turn that into a good singing voice. From the start you won't know how to sing perfectly...if you see a little kid they won't be able to (sing) even if they have a great voice. They probably won't be able to use it as well, but as you mature, you hear people singing and you start using your voice.

Xavier believes that everyone can learn to sing; “everybody does have a voice and even though your singing may not be as good as other people’s singing, you can still learn how to sing notes and makes songs with your voice.”

Xavier stated that there are some people that cannot sing as well but he attributes that to lack of confidence and/or desire. When describing a bad singer he says it is “probably somebody who just always has the thought in the back of their mind that they are a bad singer and they can never sing good.” He also shared that you have to want to be better in order to become better at singing. A bad singer is someone that “every time they sing they don't really care and they don't really try.” Xavier also shared “not everyone can sing a certain type of music.” He says a good singer is “somebody who knows their voice and then uses their voice to find out what type of music they sing the best and then uses that to make good music.”

### **How Do You Describe a Color?**

Xavier likes to sing, but not with others. He sings when he is bored: “I guess I sing sometimes but I don't really sing in front of other people much.” Xavier sings songs he likes to keep from being bored. He shared “if I like a song and if I don't want to just put it on and listen, I can (sing). Why not just sing it myself and enjoy it”. Xavier also explained where his belief about his singing voice came from. He said “my parents would



hear the song (he was singing) and say ‘hey you’re a really good singer’.” He also stated that others have said that as well: “Every time someone hears me sing they say I am good. So I kind of just developed that thought that I am a good singer.”

Xavier shared an early memory of singing in kindergarten. He sang for a concert about bugs and got all dressed up. He could not remember if it was a positive or negative experience and he sounded very indifferent about it. He also had that same indifference when he shared a later memory of singing. He spoke about his grade school concert:

It was mostly just going to music class and we would learn the lyrics and would just know where to stand and then on the performance we would just go to the concert and sing the song we were taught.

Xavier does not sing with his friends or family and although he sings to keep from being bored, he did not share any other experiences of singing that were positive or negative. He has never listened to a recording of himself singing before and when I recorded Xavier singing *Amazing Grace*, he showed more indifference. He felt neutral about the experience of singing and also indifferent about how he did. He was unable to come up with descriptions for what he heard or to describe his voice. He did say “It’s just like a color; you can’t really describe it”. When I asked further, he described his voice as “a voice that is controlled in a way where it can go up or down and controlled to make music.”

Xavier believes that people learn to sing. He holds the belief that if you have confidence and a desire to be a better singer there are things you can improve. He was not able to articulate many things about how one can improve their own singing other than “just kind of find what you’re good at and then expand on that.” Xavier believes he sings well. This view in part comes from family and people telling him he has a good voice. He

does not sing with friends or family, but sings when he is alone and shares how singing is a way to keep from being bored. Xavier believes that your voice is designed to sing certain styles of music yet he was not able to place his own voice or describe it after listening to a recording.

### **Summary**

Both Artemis and Xavier like to sing and both share a deep connection with singing. Both students primarily sing alone, not with friends or in a group. Both believe anyone can learn to sing and they both identified desire as a requirement for getting better. They also both stated that you have to have confidence and believe in yourself. Xavier believes he is a good singer because others have told him so, while Artemis's opinion changes from day to day and it appears to not have solidified yet. Both students believe that your voice is designed to sing a certain style of music. Neither student was able to share very much about their own singing voices.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **Non-Singers Who Like To Sing**

The next three stories describe students that all call themselves non-singers, although they all enjoy singing. They believe that singing is something which can be improved. They were all able to articulate why they enjoy singing.

#### **Chloe's Story**

Chloe walked into the interview ready to talk to the world. She was the very first student I interviewed. She walked into the art room and sat down on a stool next to me sharing ideas easily and freely. Chloe is a 7<sup>th</sup> grade student, who looks a bit like a modern day Goldie Locks. She was friendly, bubbly and appeared excited to share.

#### **Put Your Heart In It**

Our conversation began centered on Chloe's opinion of her own voice. Chloe does not consider herself a singer, but she likes to sing. She believes that some people are born with better voices than others, but "anyone can sing if they put their heart in it". She believes that confidence has a lot to do with success as a singer. She also believes that it has a lot to do with your background, family and your desire for it. She stated, "Let's just say your parents are singers and then you are kind of open to that". She believes that if you are brought up by people who sing, and are open to the idea of singing, you will be more open to singing too. She mentioned that her parents do not sing and that they do not have good voices either. Chloe shared that she and her sister occasionally overhear or "catch" each other singing. She giggled when she spoke of that.

Chloe has memories of singing when she was a little girl in a kindergarten concert: "I tried to be the loudest person." When she picked her up that night from the

concert, her mom mentioned she could hear Chloe all the way across the auditorium and Chloe remembered feeling embarrassed at that moment. Even at that age, she must have had a sense that being loud was not necessarily the desired quality. Chloe also shared: “I used to watch American Idol. I used to think that I would always go on the show and so singing kind of gave me the feeling of just, putting your emotions...expressing yourself”. She also mentioned that she sings into her toothbrush and hairbrush, daydreaming about being a superstar. She explains that one of the reasons she likes to sing is “you kind of become a different person.” This idea had come up in the initial survey responses as well.

Chloe enjoys singing with her friends because she likes hearing everyone’s voice. Although she loves to think about being a singer and she loves singing with friends, Chloe started thinking of herself as a bad singer about a year ago. She tried to sing a song by Adele and when she listened to a recording of herself she said, “I tried to hit a high note, and it was really bad, it was really off.” She mentioned another more recent experience she had with singing in her 6<sup>th</sup> grade choir concert: “I was singing and I was just kind of uncomfortable with my voice”. She sang really quietly and mouthed words “which was really not a good idea.” She realized lip syncing at a concert was not what was expected. She did, however, state that she likes her voice because “I think it fits who I am, fits with my personality.”

As part of the interview, I recorded her singing. As we recorded, she mentioned she was a little shy and “didn’t really have the confidence to sing really well.” My impression of her singing for the recording, as a voice teacher and choir director, was that she had a lovely voice. She sang on pitch, with a nice tone, and was surprisingly accurate for someone who stated she was “tone deaf to herself”. When I played the recording for

her, Chloe was disappointed. She stated she “was singing on wrong notes, it was kind of being tone deaf”. When I asked her to describe her voice, all Chloe could identify were her mistakes. She was unable to describe her voice and what she heard other than, “I think I started on the wrong note and so that kind of ruined the rest”.

### **Her Own Worst Critic**

Even though Chloe loves singing to help her imagine being someone else, when she sings a wrong note, it destroys the image she is trying to create. She shared this often - in her example of singing Adele, listening to recordings of herself, and in the interview recording. It appears that she has a good ear and a good voice, but she is only able to hear the mistakes she makes. She is very critical of her perceived shortcomings. When I asked her why she does not call herself a singer since she likes her voice and she likes to sing, Chloe responded, “I just think I wouldn’t have the confidence.” She appears to equate being a singer with being a performer. Other than trying to hit specific notes more accurately and having confidence, she was not able to articulate other things that students can improve upon to become better singers. She also made it clear: “I think people should always sing whether they are good or not.”

Chloe holds a strong belief that if you have confidence and a desire to be a better singer, you can improve your singing. It is difficult to know from her interview if she is able to apply this belief to her own singing. She believes that people are born with varying degrees of talent, however, she was not able to articulate many things about how someone can improve their own singing. For Chloe, singing is an escape and a way to fantasize about being a star, even though she doesn’t believe she can sing well. Singing helps her express her emotions. She loves singing with her friends because she loves

hearing everyone's unique voice. She understands some of what shaped the opinion of her own singing ability, but she appears unaware that the analysis of her voice centers around disappointment and inaccuracies rather than any positive qualities. She was not able to describe the actual quality of her voice. Chloe shared that she wishes she were better at singing (even though she loves to sing), but knows she does not have the confidence needed to consider calling herself a singer.

### **Wendy's Story**

Wendy came into the music office right before lunch for her interview. The music office is a small space within a small room that is shared by the band director. I talked with Wendy on the second day of my interviews. She appeared very shy and uncertain about where to sit. She is a very petite 7<sup>th</sup> grader with long brown hair, glasses, and an accent. Wendy speaks very quietly.

### **You Can Do Anything You Set Your Mind To**

Wendy had concrete opinions on the nature versus nurture question of singing. She stated, "some people are born to be able to sing really well. Some other people who can't sing as well as they want to ... can learn to be able to sing better." In our conversation, she said, "you can learn to do whatever you want to...pretty much anyone who can talk can be able to sing or learn". Wendy shared that her mother has helped shape her views. Her mother told her that 'you can learn to do anything you set your mind to'. Wendy said: "I have seen people learn how to do stuff that nobody thought would be possible. I think that if that can happen, you can learn how to sing." Later in the interview she shared a specific example of someone who at first did not sing well, but who later showed improvement:

In the play, this one girl played Mushu—at first she didn't sing that well, she kind of used more like a talking voice, like louder, not like real singing. All of us were kind of nervous for the play cuz she couldn't sing that well and she was one of the main characters. But after awhile she would, with a bunch of practicing and getting some feedback on what she needed to do and I bet she practiced at home too. For the actual shows, she sounded really good.

Wendy was able to articulate the ways that singing can be improved saying, “there are ways to fix the way you sing –you can open up your chords or mouth more, you can project better and you can keep practicing”. She gave more specific ideas you could use to improve your singing such as “how to take breaths between sentences and sounds”. She also described ways to take care of your voice, “if you drink a lot (of water) or don't talk when you don't have to it can help you.” Wendy believes there are certain things you cannot change, for instance “what kind of voice you have. You can try to sing a bit higher or lower, but if you are a really high voice like an opera singer then you can't do the really low voices.” She also mentioned that “some people think they can't sing because the songs they try to sing don't go with their voice. If you find the right kind of music then I think you can sound good.”

### **A Singer is Outgoing**

Wendy enjoys singing, but does not really consider herself a singer:

Well I am not that outgoing at all. I am not that loud. I like to try to sing but I've heard some really good people that can sing really good. They sound really nice and when I hear myself and compare myself to those people, I am not as good.

She clearly considers a good singer to be “someone that's outgoing”. She also said a good singer is “someone who hits the right notes. They sound like they are in rhythm. They have a nice tone.” She did say that “different people have different voices so its kind of hard to compare I guess, but people who can't sing ..go off pitch.. I like to describe it as smooth or jaggedy.”

Despite the fact that she does not consider herself a singer or a good singer, she did share a specific memory as to when she started thinking about being a good singer versus being a bad singer:

I think I was in first or second grade and I was singing *High School Musical* in the car and my mom's partner Suzie said you have a very nice voice and I was like cool, and started to think about what that meant and at first I thought I was pretty good.

Then Wendy explained: "I went to this school and Molly sings all the time and she sounds so much better cuz she can hit a bunch of different notes and it sounds good."

Wendy also shared a recent experience of being in the school musical: "I was at rehearsal with a bunch of people that can sing really well and the fact that I didn't have that big of a role made me feel like I didn't have such a good voice." She described her voice as "not really loud, a lower voice, it's not as high and sometimes I go off pitch."

Wendy enjoys singing with friends as she explained:

It's fun! we don't sing for talent –we don't try to sing good, but we just make up these fun songs like Spanish songs cuz we are in Spanish. Sometimes we start singing those songs out loud to be funny or something or just to have fun singing the same song and its fun.

Wendy does not sing with her family, but she does sing by herself. I asked her if she has ever heard a recording of herself and she mentioned she had. When we recorded her singing *Amazing Grace*, she said she was nervous, but after she practiced she felt better. She said that it was kind of fun and it made her happy. When we listened she said, "I was embarrassed, but happy cuz I sounded better than I kind of thought I would." When I asked her to describe her voice and what she heard she said, "It was kind of plain. I don't know though, it didn't have a tune...like a good tone. It was kind of low, and then at the end it gets kind of high."



Wendy believes that although some people are born to sing better than others, everyone can learn to sing. Not only has she seen people accomplish things that nobody else thought possible, she cited a specific example of how a student that people thought sang badly improved her singing and ended up singing well. She was able to share several specific ways that someone can improve their singing. She also stated that people's voices are meant to sing certain types of music, which seems to resonate with several other participants as well. Wendy's definition of being a good singer includes someone who is outgoing and someone who hits the correct notes. An important part of Wendy's opinion of her own singing greatly revolves around comparisons to other people. She compared herself to others at least 5 times during the interview. When she listened to her own voice she described not having a good tune or tone (which may show a lack of clarity in understanding the difference between the two terms) and that her voice was low first and then got high (which may be a description of the melodic contour rather than vocal quality).

### **Joel's Story**

Joel is a tall, exceptionally polite and thoughtful 8<sup>th</sup> grade student. Although the majority of the student interviews for this project took place during the school year and school day, Joel's took place after the school year ended due to scheduling challenges. Since Joel was an 8<sup>th</sup> grader, he completed classes a few days early and was kept busy with preparations for graduation. He agreed to come in on his free time after his school year ended to record his interview. So, on his first day of summer vacation, he got up bright and early to share his beliefs about singing. He met me in the music wing of the school to record in my office.

Joel is a self-declared non-singer who calls himself that because he is a clarinetist and because he does not like to get up in front of people (even though neither of those two ideas are necessarily relative to singing). Joel believes singing is a combination of born talent and learned skills. He explained that some people just sing well: “I know of some people who are good singers like Amy Grant for example. My mom loves her and I like listening to her. I also like Dennis DeYoung from Styx”. In other cases, “sometimes they may have learned it (singing) and some people might have been born with potential”. Joel compared learning to sing with learning to play soccer:

I play soccer and now I have been playing for 8 years and that can happen with singing. You have the potential to do it and if you just practice, practice, practice, practice, you develop into somebody who is good and can sing the stuff.

He explained that the little things you learn along the way with soccer are similar to how you learn things along the way for singing. He described practicing a soccer drill many times and related that to how he learns clarinet.

### **You Need to Enjoy Singing**

Joel also believes that you need to have the desire to sing in order to get better: “There needs to be a certain amount of enjoyment and willingness to do it. If somebody does not enjoy it, in this case with singing, they need to enjoy, they won’t be able to reach their full potential”. He also stated, you “have to be open... open to a little criticism but also constructive feedback. Some people are not like that and then kind of stay in the same place.”

Joel believes that everyone can sing unless there is a physical disability. When I asked him if he thinks there are some people that cannot sing, he responded, “probably 1 in every million.” Joel stated that he would describe a non-singer as someone who cannot

carry a tune. Joel described what he meant saying, “they might not have the ability for that piece to get all the notes correctly, all the rhythms right, and make it sound like this is what the composer wanted”.

Joel, at first, called himself a non-singer, yet according to his definition of a non-singer he does not fit into that category. It is important to note that Joel thinks he can carry a tune: “I think from playing an instrument I can carry a tune fairly well and I am also pretty good at memorizing things.” It seems clear then, that he does not apply his definition of a non-singer or singer to his own ability. When Joel clarified further what he meant about someone who was not able to get all the notes correct, he used band as an example stating, “with band it takes us a long time to make something happen. When we first do it, it sounds jumbled because we don’t pay attention to all the stuff”. He shared that with some people “no matter how hard somebody works for that piece, they may just never work it out. They try to get everything right but it just might not work out because of how they’re doing.” Even though Joel believes you can learn to sing better, he also believes that you are born with a set potential.

### **I Like Doing Things Well**

Joel shared that he can remember singing all the way back when he was 5 or 6 years old: “that's when I really started grasping music. It seemed like that's when I got to appreciate Amy Grant and how she sings and that's when I started to listen to her songs and memorize them”. His more recent memory of singing was just a few days prior to the interview at his 8<sup>th</sup> grade graduation. He expressed again that he does not like being in front of people. He does like to make a good impression and do the right thing: “I like doing well and accomplishing some things like making other people happy with what I

accomplish.” Joel continued to describe the graduation song and his experience. He explained that he feels like he has to work extra hard to make up for the students that do not do the right thing:

When boys get up to my age, they think they are too cool for some stuff. There are some kids in my class and I feel as though they didn't perform to what they could have. When that happens I feel as though I have to make up for it some how so that kind of gets to me. I don't want to turn around and say its two minutes just do it. It's bad I don't really say anything I just try to make what I can do be the best possible that I can.

Joel feels a lot of pressure to do things perfectly and that is one of the reasons he has never felt comfortable getting up in front of others to sing. He has often thought of getting up to cantor for mass because he sees that as a leadership role and a chance for responsibility, but he has not had the courage or confidence to do it:

I have been trying to be the best positive force in our community that I can. Part of that is getting involved and I have always looked at the cantors and thought they have a lot of courage to stand up there and sing in front of the entire school or the entire congregation at mass. It was always something I thought about of possibly doing then middle school happened and I finally had the ability to do it and that is when I really started thinking ‘do I really want to do this?’ I thought about it and just thought about it and thought that if I can't do this to what I think my standards of a good singer is, then I would like to either not do it or possibly practice until I can and that's kind of what I have been contemplating over the past years.

Joel really shows a passion for music and even singing. He enjoys singing with friends and family that he knows will not critique him or judge him. When he speaks about music he really gets a glow in his eyes: “it inspires me ...music really, really inspires me.”

### **Hearing His Voice for the First Time**

As I recorded Joel singing *Amazing Grace*, I noticed he sang with a clear accurate tone. Joel shared “depending on the situation, I will either willingly give out information

or retain information and I think this is one of the situations I would have rather retained my information if you know I mean”. I did not know exactly what he meant but I was curious about what he was trying to tell me. He clarified “I felt as though I was sharing something with you that I normally don't really share with anybody else.” It was clear that singing is a deeply personal and emotional encounter for Joel. He wants to be good at singing (even though he identifies himself as a non-singer). He mentioned that he had never listened to a recording of himself singing until now and said he did not even recognize his voice. Joel stated he was self-conscious and would have liked the recording better if it were accompanied: “I personally think most things will sound better with an instrument accompaniment”. Joel said overall, recording his voice was more positive than negative. He realized that this was a good tool for assessing “so I can evaluate myself better”.

Joel had much to share about his ideas and belief about music. His passion for music was evident. Music is a large part of his life, whether he is listening to it or performing it. Joel believes that you can improve your singing ability if you practice. At the same time he believes that some people are born with more potential than others. Joel expressed that he likes to sing, but not in front of others which may be why he identified himself as a non-singer. He has given a lot of thought to singing and has made a decision that unless he is able to do it exceptionally well he would not be comfortable getting up in front of people to sing. He sees a singer as someone who performs, so even though he sings, enjoys singing, and sings with friends, he still does not call himself a singer. It is important to note that when he described a non-singer he said it was someone who “can't carry a tune”. Joel stated “a singer is somebody who can sing words or notes and make it

sound like music”. Although he can carry a tune and he knows he is musical, he still does not apply that definition to himself. Joel had a good handle on his own comfort level with singing and was able to articulate his beliefs about singing.

### **Summary**

Chloe, Wendy, and Joel all said they were non-singers, but each liked to sing. Joel’s definition should put him in the category of singer, but he cannot seem to see that. Chloe is so hypercritical of herself, that she cannot see past the negativity to allow herself to be a singer. Wendy needs to compare herself to others in order to validate her opinion. These students’ points of view and even definition of singer should allow them to consider themselves singers, but for various reasons they do not see themselves that way.

Joel, Wendy, and Chloe all believe you can improve your singing. Joel believes practice is necessary in order to get better. Joel and Chloe stated you need the desire to improve in order to get better. Wendy and Chloe said you need confidence, which also was brought up by Artemis and Xavier. Wendy and Joel believe that you need to find the style of music for which your voice is fit. All of these students lack the ability to describe their own voice other than high, low, shy, or quiet. They had very limited ideas to share about improving your voice, but some included practicing, taking better breath, matching pitch, drinking water, and being open to criticism.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **A Singer in the Choir**

The final case study was a student who likes to sing, considers herself a singer, and believes everyone has the potential to be a good singer.

#### **Magdalena's Story**

Magdalena was my first encounter on the second morning of interviews. We used my choir office to talk, which is a small room off the band room. Since the room is so snug, I was sitting much closer to Magdalena than to the first students I interviewed. Magdalena suffers from a medical condition that causes her to have movement limitations with the left side of her body. She is a regular member of the choir, and has never let her disability stop her from participating. She struggles at times to fit in with the other students, and although she has a very happy exterior, she has suffered from bullying. During the interview, she was very friendly and smiled a lot, but I got the distinct impression that she was nervous. She stumbled over words and her body language suggested she was not relaxed.

She is the only person I interviewed who was a current student in my choir. It appeared she wanted to present herself well to me because of this, which may have impacted her answers. She also may have given me answers in a way she thought I wanted to hear them. As part of my class I often talk about the things students can work on to improve their singing and also talk about singing being a skill.

#### **Believe in Yourself**

Magdalena began by telling me that she believes singing is a learned skill:

When you first sing you don't know what it's going to sound like, so it might not be that good or accurate the first time, but as time goes on you can experiment

with your voice and then see how it sounds. You might hear other people as well and then you can see what a good singing voice sounds like so you would learn how to use it in a good way.

Magdalena told me she has had personal experiences of seeing students improve their singing and get better. She was able to articulate that she notices students who sing better often have had voice lessons or more training. This is something that none of the other students ever mentioned, which may be connected to her participation in choir and focus on improvement of singing, especially since so many choir students were beginning level students this year. Magdalena stated:

I have heard people when they first start to sing and then I have heard someone who has had more experience, and that (person with experience) is the little bit better and they probably learned a little bit more than the person who is less experienced.

Her awareness of this issue may come from her participation in a developing choir, where students have little singing experience at the beginning of the year. Magdalena was able to hear the progress of both herself and the other choir members as the year progressed. She explained that as long as you can find out what you like to sing or are comfortable singing you will do well. She shared:

Because different people have different voices, you just have to find the kind of music or the way that you sing. You have to find what you are comfortable (with) and what you like to sing and then you can be really good at some parts or ways of singing but not others.

Magdalena believes everyone can sing. When I asked her if she believes if there are some people that cannot sing, she replied, “not really. I think everyone can sing, they just have to like find it (singing)–and experience it.” She thinks a non-singer “isn’t very experienced or doesn’t really believe in themselves or enjoy it.” She focused on a person’s tone as one of the features of a good voice. She also believes a good singer is



someone who sings on the correct pitches. She describes a bad singer as someone who “sings off key and not on key at all and does not have a very good tune.” She believes that people can learn to sing on key and also work on their voice. When I asked her what things people can improve, she mentioned “tune, tone, if it’s lower in places and then higher in some...maybe (being) louder.”

Magdalena loves to sing, however she does not sing with friends or family, which seemed odd based on her comments. She sings in the school choir and did not reveal anything about her singing outside of choir. All of the other students, even the ones that labeled themselves as non-singers shared the singing they do. It appears that Magdalena sees herself as a singer in the context of a choir, but does not sing outside of school choir. She has early memories of singing with her younger sister. They would have singing competitions to see who sang better. She said, “Me and my sister would sing together or judge each other and see if it was good or not.” From what she described, they were pretending they were on American Idol. She also said “it was kind of an experiment to see what we might need help with...get to hear your voice”. She also shared a more recent singing experience:

Our first concert (middle school choir concert) was a good experience. It was kind of different though than what we were used to ‘cuz it was kind of a new, it was a good experience. It was kind of...scary getting in front of all those people at first. Then you got to feel comfortable after a while singing.”

She was able to describe her voice by saying, “its kind of high sort of”, but similarly to the other students, when pushed to describe her voice more, Magdalena did not have any other way to elaborate.

Like the other students, I recorded Magdalena singing *Amazing Grace*. Right after we recorded it and before she listened to me play it back, she shared that she felt scared recording it. After I played it back for her, she said she was embarrassed and “shocked it sounded kind of different than I actually thought.” Magdalena has recorded and listened to herself before and said “it’s kind of weird cuz on a recording it sounds a lot different. It sounds a lot lower and a lot different than what you are used to.” When I asked Magdalena to describe what she heard on the *Amazing Grace* recording she said, “Well it was a little bit off key...it didn't sound like the actual thing.” I played it for her one more time and she said, “it sounds soft, a little quiet, sounded like I was a little nervous.” Other than soft, quiet, and a little off-key, Magdalena did not have any other descriptors for her voice on the recording.

Magdalena offered insights into what it is like to see people improve their singing ability. She noticed that singers who appear better usually have had more training, which was a new idea from participants. She also shared specific examples of when she heard people improve their singing. Magdalena believes that people need to find out what type of voice they have and then find the style or type of music that is a good fit, a comment which has been made by several other participants as well. She has strong convictions that everyone can learn to sing. She stated that believing in yourself is important to being a good singer. She also stated that people can learn to sing on key, work on their tone, and increase their volume, all musical elements which she has likely heard mentioned in choir rehearsals. She currently sings in the school choir, but does not sing with friends and rarely sings at home. She likes her voice, describing it as soft and high, but when

listening to her recording of *Amazing Grace*, she was shocked that it was quiet and a little off key. Magdalena has clear ideas about singing being something you can improve.

### **Summary**

All six students agree that you can improve your singing. Chloe, Wendy, Xavier, and Artemis all stated confidence is an important factor to improve singing. Joel, Chloe, Artemis, and Xavier specifically spoke about the desire to improve as crucial to getting better. All six of the students sing and enjoy it. Artemis, Xavier, and Magdalena do not sing with friends or others for fun, however Magdalena sings in a formal choir. She does not sing outside of choir even at home, however. Joel, Wendy, and Chloe all enjoy singing with friends. Xavier stated that he believed he was a good singer based on other people telling him that. Artemis is still shaping his opinion. Joel, Wendy, and Chloe all have recently realized they do not sing as well as they would like and they attribute that in part to a lack of confidence. Magdalena stated that recently she started to think she has a good voice. Five of the students shared their opinion that individual voices are fit for a certain style of music. All students lacked an ability to describe their voice other than high, low, loud, soft, and/or off key. The students shared a few ideas on vocal improvement, however they were very limited.

## CHAPTER SIX

“Music gives soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, and life to everything” – Plato

### Discussion

The three questions that guided this study were (1) What are the self perceptions of singing identity in adolescence?; (2) What are the adolescent beliefs about singing ability?; and (3) What are adolescent attitudes about singing? The surveys and interviews uncovered several concepts. Despite the limitations imposed by only 6 case studies (attitudes and views about singing), a few consistent themes emerged during the interviews. These themes are divided into the following areas: (1) Reasons for singing; (2) Nature of singing ability; (3) Vocabulary/lack of vocabulary; (4) Confidence/lack of confidence; and (5) Formations of opinions. Responses from all six students and the surveys help to elucidate an understanding of adolescents’ perceptions, self-perceptions and attitudes about singing.

### Why We Sing

The initial surveys revealed vast and varied responses for reasons adolescents like to sing. For the purpose of this discussion it is narrowed down to six areas: (1) enjoyment, (2) emotional connection, (3) being good at it, (4) a form of relaxation, (5) as a way to boost confidence, and (6) as an escape. The student statements about enjoyment of singing echoed previous research in adolescent attitudes about music making (Parker, 2011; Davis, 2009; Campbell, Connell, & Beagle 2007). The idea of emotional connection with music has been researched and documented in adolescence (Parker, 2011; Mills, 2010; Campbell, Connell, & Beagle 2007). Students choosing to participate in singing because they are good at it, was unique to this study. Campbell, Connell, &

Beagle (2007) explored the idea of music as an emotional release and coping mechanism which can be seen in this current study as an escape and a form of relaxation. The students in this study also voiced the idea of singing being a way to boost their confidence.

The six interviewed students offered further insight with specific reasons for singing. For instance, Xavier sings to keep from being bored. Joel, Chloe, and Wendy all said they like to sing with friends because they enjoy hearing each other's voices. They seem to enjoy singing as part of a community experience. Chloe stated that she likes to fantasize about being a star on American Idol. Artemis shared singing is a way to "unleash a bigger self". He also shared that singing in an ensemble makes him feel a part of something larger, again a community experience. Magdalena sings in the school choir, but shared that she does not sing with friends or family. She sings when she is in a bad mood to help her to be in a better one. She uses singing as a way to make her feel more confident and less sad. These students' reasons for singing fall into the same categories as those of the larger group in the initial surveys. However an additional area was revealed, the idea of singing as being part of a community. Philosophers, scientists and artists have all contemplated the reasons for singing from a very broad perspective, but these interviewees gave direct insight to the feelings and attitudes of adolescents who are growing into their voices and beginning to be able to articulate their views.

Adults who research philosophy of music give wide and varied reasons why humans sing. While many of these ideas may not yet be part of the vocabulary of students this age, several students attempted to share their ideas which could be subcategorized under a few of the adult views. Subbaraman (2009) presented information on four active

areas of research about why we sing: (1) because we are genetically related to the gibbons (small ape) which sings; (2) as an evolution of the brain paralleling the development of language and music simultaneously; (3) as a human adaptation, similar in nature to mating rituals of bird song; (4) as a cultural artifact that brings emotional responses. Adolescents may not have the context to discuss their reasons related to the first three areas (although one survey response was “I would like to be better at singing so girls will be attracted to me”), but several were able to talk about their own emotional connections in the manner of fantasy, escape, and expressing a bigger self.

One of the limitations of this study was that, of the survey students who said they do not like to sing, none were willing to be interviewed further leaving a potentially valuable source untapped. The reasons that students gave for not liking to sing fell into the following areas: (1) negative feelings about their singing voice; (2) pain or discomfort when singing; and (3) identifying themselves as instrumentalists.

Listening to the adolescents in this study, I found them able to express a variety of reasons why they sing and why they enjoy singing. It is apparent that singing is valuable to these students and can be recognized in several ways. Understanding the meaning they give singing is important to understanding the larger potential that singing has during the adolescent years.

### **Singing as a Universal Human Experience**

The students surveyed in this project were split on whether singing is learned or a born tendency, but all believe that it is accessible to everyone. Most of the students surveyed believe that singing is a combination of natural talent and learned behavior. Within the small group, Xavier stated that everyone has a voice even if it is not as good

as that of other people. Joel believed that some people just sing well and that you must have a desire to sing in order to get better. Artemis said that some people have to work at creating a beautiful voice. He also believed that if someone does not think they can sing, then that opinion will get in their way. Chloe believed that some people are born with better voices than others, but if you put your heart into it, you can learn. Magdalena believed everyone can learn to sing and can work to get better. Wendy believed that some people are born to be able to sing really well, but that those who do not sing really well can learn to get better.

Xavier, Artemis, Joel, Chloe, and Wendy all mentioned that some people may have more talent, vocal beauty, or ability than others, but they believe you can still improve. Chloe and Joel both mentioned that you need to have a desire and Artemis stated that if you do not believe in yourself, that will get in the way. Like Joel and Chloe, Magdalena had a similar view about believing in yourself and mentioned that you have to enjoy it. Magdalena, however, was the only student to mention that when she sees someone who sings better than others, she attributes that to them having more experience, rather than it being something they were born with. Both Wendy and Magdalena focused in on the need to practice in order to improve and shared specific examples of when they saw people improve their singing.

Existing studies of ideas about singing ability show that many adults believe that singing is a born ability. They believe it is fixed and unchangeable, therefore leading many adults to inaccurately label themselves as non-singers (Abril, 2007; Ruddock & Leong, 2004; Wheaton, 1998). This current study showed that the vast majority of adolescents believe that singing is something you can develop and improve. It is not clear

whether this is a change or trend in thinking in today's adolescents or unique to adolescence in general. At some point after adolescence, students may reshape opinions and start believing singing is an ability. A possibility that has to be considered is that the adults in the noted studies had similar views in their adolescence that changed or faded over time. This would need further investigation.

These interviews opened a window into the thinking of adolescents who believe that everyone can learn to improve their singing. Teachers are obligated to teach all children. Finding more appropriate ways to help children with pitch perception deficiencies will lessen the notion of non-musical vs. musical non-singer vs. singer that dominates our cultural thinking, thereby making music making opportunities more inclusive. People should not feel alienated from participation in singing. As music educators we should remember that children believe they can learn and we should be careful not to send a message that singing is a talent possessed by some and not others.

### **Lack of Confidence and Fear**

Another theme that emerged from the interviews was the idea of confidence, or rather lack of confidence, in singing. Chloe, Wendy and Joel all mentioned lack of confidence as a reason they do not consider themselves singers. All three of these students enjoy singing, but do not call themselves singers. Their lack of confidence holds them back from singing. Chloe loves to sing and she daydreams about going on American Idol. She sings with friends and she even says she likes her voice, but she does not call herself a singer because of her lack of confidence. She shared a recent memory of lip syncing for a school concert. She was too afraid to even use her voice in a large group setting.



Joel also enjoys singing. He sings with friends and he has even considered getting up in front of church to cantor, because he sees that has a “force for good”, but his fear of not being able to be perfect stops him from this opportunity. Joel mentioned he is very uncomfortable getting up in front of audiences.

Wendy focuses on the fact that she is shy and sings quietly as a reason why she does not consider herself a singer. She was not picked for a part in the school musical which has solidified her own beliefs that she is not a singer. She also compares herself to others in a way that makes her anxious about her own ability. Whidden (2009) uncovered similar experiences with the adult labeled non-singers. Many of the participants cited an event like not getting a role as the crystallizing moment. Attribution and motivation theories have identified that adolescence was the time that both success and failure was often established (Asmus, 1986; Legette, 1998; Vispoel & Austin, 1998).

Fear is a response to perceived danger. It is easy to see the possibilities and vulnerabilities at hand when you open your mouth to sing and share something so personal. Singers such as Adele have acknowledged stage fright. Much attention has been given to stage fright and musical performance anxiety in both choral and vocal settings (Ryan, & Andrews 2009). Lack of confidence and fear appear to be a significant reason why these students do not participate in music making. Joel, Chloe, and Wendy who like to sing, like their voices, and dream of being singers stopped themselves from singing because of fear. Chloe, Joel, and Wendy’s stories should be of particular interest to educators. After listening to each of these students sing, I would not have classified them as non-singers, yet they call themselves non-singers because they are afraid. There have been many studies done on the topic of inaccurate self-labeling of non-singers in adults

(Abril, 2007; Cuddy et al., 2005; Ruddock & Leong, 2004; Sloboda et al., 2005; Wheaton, 1998; Whidden, 2009). Many of the adults in these studies can pinpoint a specific moment when they felt musically inadequate and in many of the cases, fear and lack of confidence were behind it, often connected to adolescence.

Reassuring students that being afraid or nervous is normal becomes part of the teaching process in music. It should be common practice for music teachers to address fear of performing. Music education methods classes should talk about fear, shyness, and lack of confidence when approaching singing.

### **Limited Vocabulary**

Another idea that emerged from this study has to do with what the students could *not* identify or describe about their voices. All of the students had very limited vocabulary to describe their own voices. They also had limited ability to talk about how you can improve your voice or what areas you can work on. The six case study interviews showed examples of what students were able to describe, but more importantly showed that there was very limited vocabulary at their disposal.

Initially, each student was asked to describe their voice. The only descriptors that were used were (1) soft or quiet, (2) off key or off pitch, (3) high or low, and (4) good or not good. Xavier had no words to describe his voice and suggested it was like describing a color—something he finds impossible. Later when listening to the recording of their own singing, they defaulted to describing qualities of the melody they were singing, not the quality of their voice.

When asked to talk about ways people can improve singing, the students said you can work on several things. They said you can improve (1) confidence level (2) matching

pitch or singing on key (3) taking care of your throat (4) drinking a lot of water (5) singing louder (6) being open to constructive feedback and (7) finding the type of music for your voice. Five of the six students emphasized their belief that your voice is meant to sing certain styles and you should figure out what your good at and sing that style. This may be coming out of reality TV singing shows. There have been no research studies identified on this concept. It is an avenue which needs to be followed to clearly define what these adolescents are saying.

Ken Phillips (1992) in his book, *Teaching Kids to Sing*, shares the history of singing education in the United States from Lowell Mason in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, forward. Phillips discusses the ‘song approach’ as one of the main ways music educators have taught general music classes since about the 1930s. Singing technique is often not taught, but instead, songs are taught. He suggests that the problem with the ‘song approach’ is that this approach often neglects actual teaching of singing (Phillips, 1992). The ‘song approach’ can be seen in the major music education textbooks being used today. If students are not being taught the fundamentals of good singing habits, nor words to describe their instrument or how to improve, then we have students who do not know why someone is a good singer or a bad singer. They also then will not know how to achieve good singing.

Although the current study represents one particular school, it serves as an example of what is happening in current practice. It is important to equip students with vocabulary to describe their voices and the areas of vocal sound that can be developed. It is important to give students the knowledge of how to improve their singing to build on

the ideology of music as a life long skill (Abril, 2007; Cuddy et al., 2005; Ruddock & Leong, 2004; Sloboda et al., 2005; Wheaton, 1998; Whidden, 2009),

### **Formation of Singer Identity**

The students surveyed and interviewed shared insight into when and how they shaped their opinions of their singing voice and whether they identify themselves as a singer or non-singer. In many of the studies on adults self-labeled as non-singers, many subjects identified adolescence as the time when their opinion was developed (citation). The current study investigated what adolescents thought about their own singing, and how and when they shaped this view.

The surveys identified that more than half of the students considered themselves to be singers, approximately one third would not call themselves singers, and the remaining did not know. The reasons that were given for identification as a non-singer in order of prevalence were: (1) quality of sound; (2) lack of involvement; (3) lack of confidence; and (4) non-enjoyment. Ruddock & Leong (2004) uncovered the reasons adults labeled themselves non-musical in their case studies as a) not being able to master an instrument, b) perceived inaccuracies, c) fear of external judgment, and d) inferior skills. While the study by Ruddock and Leong is more broadly focused, there are similarities in the findings.

The reasons given for identification as a singer in order of prevalence were: (1) involvement/frequency; (2) enjoyment; (3) quality of sound; (4) external opinions; and (5) accuracy. The interviewed students gave similar reasons for the non-singers specifying lack of confidence, lack of accuracy and a quiet sound, and for the singers, enjoyment and confidence.

The surveys showed a wide array of life moments when students felt their views on singer identity were formed. For a few, it was as far back as kindergarten, and others said they were still thinking about it or just started thinking about it. Other students listed specific moments when an occurrence solidified their view. At least half listed a recent event of some kind. Stephens (2012) identified adolescence as the number one time that non-singers determined their singing identity. Singers more often identified very early years as the time when their opinion was formed.

The case studies offered an opportunity to learn more about how and when these adolescents were shaping their view of singer identity. Artemis, who calls himself a singer, shared that his opinion fluctuates, but that he currently has days where he thinks he is a good singer and other days when he does not. He shared that some days his voice does not sound as good as other days. Xavier's view was shaped by external opinions. He considers himself a singer because many people have told him he sings well. He could not remember the moment that this started happening, but he did not think it was recent. Magdalena, also a self-labeled singer, did not remember when she starting thinking of herself as a singer. As she got older, she would hear herself sing and realized it was good. Joel's opinion changes like Artemis', but although he knows he sings on key, he is starting to see that his voice may not be as good as he would like it to be to perform. Chloe has only recently started doubting herself and said that recent moments with her friends who sing well have made her realize she does not sound as good as she would like. She shared that she sounded like she was screaming and not hitting the notes correctly. Wendy was told by others when she was younger that she sings well. Recently, since participating in the musical and not getting a role, she realized she does not sing

loud enough and does not have the confidence that others have. Denial of a role in the musical became a solidifying factor for her.

When students label themselves as non-singers without all the facts or even the knowledge of what can be fixed or improved, it reveals why we have so many adult singers who inaccurately label themselves non-singers or “tone-deaf” (Abril, 2007; Cuddy et al., 2005; Ruddock & Leong, 2004; Sloboda et al., 2005; Wheaton, 1998; Whidden, 2009). The six case studies serve as a window into what adolescents are deciding about their singing voice and when. Students compare themselves to other peers, sometimes students that have had voice lessons or singing environments at home, which discourages the students who have not had as many opportunities. Without realizing all of the factors that are part of good singing, many students have established their opinion with limited information. Not taking into account a musical spectrum of ability has led many adults to inaccurately label themselves non-musicians or non-singers (Whidden, 2009; Sloboda, Wise, and Peretz, 2005). Music teachers should take particular note of this and provide students with the necessary tools to improve their singing, which can help to relieve a sense of being ostracized from the activity of singing. One recent book on teaching general music in the middle school by Burton (2012) clearly states that you should not teach technique when singing in general music class saying, “Do not try to teach vocal technique in a general music class” p. 32. The findings of the current study would dispute this notion and should serve as an example of the need for teaching basic vocal technique in general music. These young singers may need the opportunity to fix specific problems and learn how to grow vocally beyond judging themselves against their peers. Each of the students in this study had specific areas in which they would benefit

from knowledge about their voice. For Chloe, it appears that helping her grow and develop her range would improve her view. Wendy could benefit from an understanding of how breath support produces volume. Joel appears to have stage fright and confidence issues with his singing, while for Artemis, consistency with his vocal production was his greatest concern. Teaching singing technique, even to a limited degree, could provide the foundation for music making in a similar way to first teaching addition and subtraction for higher level math. Students need to be given vocabulary with which to describe their voice as one tool that could help them improve their singing.

### **Summary**

Responses from both the surveys and interviews helped me to understand how these students thought about adolescent singer identity. Most of the adolescents in this study find value in singing. They were able to articulate that they sing because they (1) enjoy it; (2) find emotional connection through it; (3) are good at it; (4) find it relaxing; (5) gain confidence through it; and (6) can use it as an escape. The few students in this study who do not like to sing shared it is because they (1) have negative feelings about their singing voice; (2) have pain or discomfort when singing; or (3) identify themselves as an instrumentalist. When uncovering student beliefs regarding singing ability, the students were split between whether they believe singing is an inborn talent or something you learn. All the interviewed students view people as having varying levels of singing ability, but all expressed that students can improve their singing.

Despite the views they were able to articulate, the students had surprisingly few words to describe their own singing voices or ways people can improve their singing. An additional theme that emerged was the idea of confidence with singing and how big a part

this plays. Many surveyed students responded saying they do not have the confidence to call themselves a singer and this was echoed in the interviews with three of the students who love to sing and even like their voices, but do not feel outgoing or confident enough to sing. All of the students in the study indicated some fear associated with their singing.

Finally, this study looked at when students were shaping their views about their singing identity. Over half of the students in the surveys labeled themselves singers, while the remaining either said they did not know or would not call themselves singers. The surveys revealed a very wide range of times and events that shaped these views, with some students clearly showing that their views are still forming. The interviews gave additional insight into this by sharing more specific events and feelings about the students' voices. These students shared fairly recent experiences to clarify the formation of their singing identity.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Implications For Music Education Practice

These interviews opened a window into the thinking of adolescents who believe that everyone can learn to improve their singing. Finding more appropriate ways to help children with pitch perception deficiencies will lessen the notion of non-musical vs. musical non-singer vs. singer that dominates our cultural thinking, thereby making music making opportunities more inclusive. People should not feel alienated from participation in singing as a community experience. As music educators, our message should welcome students into an experience of singing governed not by the concept of talent possessed by some and not others.

Fear and nervousness are normal elements of performance and understanding this idea should be part of the teaching process in music. Music education methods classes should address fear, shyness, and lack of confidence when approaching singing, particularly solo singing in the adolescent years. There have been many studies done on the topic of inaccurate self-labeling of non-singers by adults (Abril, 2007; Cuddy et al., 2005; Ruddock & Leong, 2004; Sloboda et al., 2005; Wheaton, 1998; Whidden, 2008), with many of the adults pinpointing a specific moment when they felt musically inadequate. In many of the cases, fear and lack of confidence were key elements, often connected to adolescence.

Although this study represents one particular school and a small group of students, it serves as an example of what is happening in current practice at the middle school level. It is important to equip students with vocabulary to describe their voices and

the areas of vocal sound that can be developed. By giving students the knowledge about how to improve their singing, they build on the ideology of music as a life long skill.

Students label themselves as non-singers with insufficient understanding of their voice's potential, which reveals why so many adult singers inaccurately label themselves non-singers or "tone-deaf" (Sloboda, Wise, and Peretz, 2005). These six case studies help to reveal what adolescents are deciding about their singing voice and when. Students compare themselves to other peers, sometimes students that have had voice lessons or have strong singing environments at home, which discourages individuals with limited opportunities. Encouragement to enjoy the experience and assistance to improve their singing, will provide adolescents with a connection to the activity of singing and others who participate. One recent book on teaching general music in the middle school by Burton (2012) clearly states that you should not teach technique when singing in general music class saying, "Do not try to teach vocal technique in a general music class" (p. 32). The findings of the current study would dispute this notion and should serve as an example for the inclusion of teaching basic vocal technique in general music. These young singers may need the opportunity to fix specific vocal problems and learn how to develop healthy vocally habits beyond judging themselves against their peers. Each of the students in this study had specific areas in which they would benefit from knowledge about their voice.

For Chloe, it appears that helping her grow her range would improve her view. Wendy could benefit from an understanding of how breath support produces volume. Joel appears to have stage fright and confidence issues with his singing, while for Artemis, consistency with his vocal production was his greatest concern. Teaching singing

technique, even to a limited degree, provides the foundation for music making in a similar way to first teaching addition and subtraction for higher-level math. Students need to be given vocabulary as a foundation with which to describe their voice as a tool that could help them improve their singing.

### **Summary**

As music educators we have the extraordinary opportunity to help students become more human by expressing themselves through their voice. Adolescents have all levels of vocal ability and music educators have the opportunity to guide students through a continuum of singing development. Fear and anxiety over singing ability and performance are natural events which students need to understand as normal rather than as an indicator of singing potential. Helping students to have vocabulary to describe their voice, their ability level, and ways to improve their voice will empower them to see themselves as singers. Teachers that work with adolescents need to pay particular attention to this study and previous studies about how students are shaping their singer identity. It is important at this age to not put unnecessary elitism in school music programs. Music teachers should be aware of the concept of singer identity and find ways to improve singer confidence.

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