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Life as a Cabaret: Singing Our Ideal Self into Being

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Musical interaction – and particularly performing – is well understood as a vehicle for self-discovery and identity development, but there are relatively few secure performance environments for singers to explore. This chapter explores how singing, voice and identity intersect, and the potential cabaret performance holds for trans and cis-gender singers' individual self-development.

An identity is always already an ideal, what we would like to be, not what we are [...] But if musical identity is, then, always fantastic, idealizing not just oneself but also the social world one inhabits, it is, secondly, always also real, enacted in musical activities [...] In this respect, musical pleasure is not derived from fantasy – it is not mediated by daydreams – but is experienced directly: Music gives us a real experience of what the ideal could be.

(Frith 1996: 123, emphasis added)

Introduction

The image of the traditional concert performance is one of a near-religious formality and stodgy ritual performed by highly trained professionals. By contrast, the image of a *cabaret* is its direct opposite: loud, raucous, informal, irreverent. Instead of formal performances given by acolytes in the gleaming temple of the concert

hall, cabaret is performed by anyone who wants to share their music with an audience, often in venues where ‘shabby’ is a generous way to describe the ambience. Cabaret is the illegitimate sibling of the vocal world – showing up tipsy at the family reunion, openly speaking all the things everyone thinks but dares not say.

As a musical/theatrical form, cabaret can run the gamut from amateur variety show to the professional vocalist’s take on the solo autobiographical performance. In this chapter, however, I am defining cabaret as a loosely themed collection of vocal performances from an array of musical genres, by performers of disparate backgrounds and levels of experience. These performances are usually organized and presented by an Emcee, whose role is to keep the show on track and manage the atmosphere with off-the-cuff banter and humour.

This looseness of format can result in chaos, but it’s also what gives cabaret its power: everyone can participate, everything goes and every *body* is welcome. It’s an environment in which vocational and avocational performers alike can explore themselves, their gender and their sexuality. There’s even room for performers to work out their place in the world, in an environment that is usually composed of friends, family or supportive outsiders. No performance environment is ever completely safe, but a sympathetic space in which to try on new emotions, new identities, new pieces of the puzzle that are our *self* is as secure as such experiences can be.

Generally, when we talk about music and identity development in avocational musical education, the focus is on musical *listening* – the consumption of music performance. In my experience as a trans-identified musician and music educator, however, it is *performance*, and *singing* in particular, that has been the most useful path for identity development and self-discovery in avocational musicians. Cabaret, with its openness and its chaos, has been the perfect vehicle for this kind of self-defining performance – both for my students *and* for myself.

Who am I? Performance as identity development

Identity development is movement; a sometimes-constant, sometimes-erratic progression towards an idealized self. It’s also a movement towards an idealized self that is itself shifting and changing as we’re exposed to new ideas, new opportunities and new ways to be in the world.

A marker of human advancement could be described as the freedom – materially and spiritually – to explore new facets of self. Certainly, one of the most remarkable shifts in twenty-first century social development has been the explosion of possibility in personal identity, particularly around the intersection of gender and sexuality.

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1 Musical interaction has long been recognized as an important vehicle for identity
 2 development. This is, in part, because it offers the participant an opportunity
 3 to ‘try on’ new facets of identity, sometimes referred to as *provisional selves*. The
 4 idea of *provisional identities* is akin to trying on a new suit of clothes; we put on
 5 a new set of beliefs, behaviours or emotions to see how it ‘fits’ us. And, like new
 6 clothes, we might decide that it doesn’t flatter us and reject it altogether, or we
 7 might love it and keep it and wear it every day. Conversely, we might initially
 8 dislike it, but keep coming back to it again and again, adjusting here and there,
 9 until we decide that not only will we keep it, we’ll wear it at every available
 10 opportunity.

1 When we sing, we’re not just trying on a new self in the metaphorical sense,
 2 we’re experiencing it literally; we’re stepping into that new role, experienc-
 3 ing those emotions in a real, intense way. In the process, we’re also commu-
 4 nicating our hesitation and/or eagerness, our uncertainty and/or surety, our
 5 worry and our joy in this new role to our audience. We are modelling this new,
 6 provisional self in the mirror *and* putting it out there in front of an audience,
 7 taking in their reaction and processing their reception of this potential ideal
 8 self.

Self-concept, identity and music education

1 What role does music education (and by extension, a music educator)
 2 play in a young student’s personal development?

3 *Self-concept*, a person’s perception of themselves, is as much social
 4 as it is personal. Our understanding of ourselves is strongly impacted by
 5 the information we receive about ourselves from other people. Whether
 6 or not we understand ourselves to be musical or even have the capacity
 7 for music relies in no small part on the musical interactions with have
 8 with our teachers and with our peers in musical environments during our
 9 developmental years. If others communicate to us that we are musical,
 10 then it is much more likely that we will integrate the label of ‘musician’
 into our *self-concept* (Elorriaga 2011).

Things to think about

1 How did your early musical experiences influence your decision to be
 2 a musician?

Come to the cabaret: My trying-on story

I am a music educator now, but I have always been a performer. I have worked as a professional musician in many capacities, though primarily as a classical vocalist, where I have experienced a great deal of joy on the operatic and concert stage. While I would argue that there is room for personal exploration in that repertoire, given the level of scrutiny that accompanies classical vocal performance there is no room for the level of vulnerability intense self-discovery requires.

When I initially began to have questions about my gender identity, my career path precluded any sort of musical self-exploration, which I felt very acutely. As my gender identity collided with my professional, musical and vocal identities, I focused more on my academic career and began to perform less and less until I quit classical performance almost entirely for several years.

After leaving classical repertoire for a time, I realized that I needed some kind of outlet, not just to satisfy my artistic side, but to explore all of these new, uncertain and, frankly, *scary* new ideas that were swimming in my head. *Am I transgender? What does that mean? Do I really feel this or am I just pretending? What will people say? What will happen to my career? Will I lose my singing voice if I transition?*

I had so much to express, so many new selves to try on, and nowhere to do it... which is when I started to think about cabaret. In the cabaret environment, I realized I could sing whatever I wanted: musical theatre, jazz, pop, rock, R&B. If it could be played on a piano and sung by a singer, it was fair game. In this way, I could – and did – try on many, many different provisional selves. Even more importantly, I was able to do it in front of people who accepted me as whoever and whatever I was in that moment.

I did not keep every provisional self that I tried on in song, of course. In time, though, I was able to home in on the parts of a new gender identity that I wanted to retain. I became a brand-new man, quite literally, through cabaret; I do not believe I would have had such a clear transition if I had not had the time and space to sing my new self into being.

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Musical vs. personal identity

How does singing intersect and influence self-development?

Research around music and identity suggests that voice is an integral part of self-identity – certainly, speaking voice is a large part of one’s sense of self, but investigation has found that singing voice holds a great deal of weight as well, particularly for vocational and avocational

1
2 singers. Musical vocalization can be an important part of the ‘actual
3 construction, maintenance and performance of self at various stages
4 of personal, musical and psychological development’ (Faulkner and
5 Davidson 2004: 232; Graham 2019)
6
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8 *Things to think about*
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10 How does your speaking voice intersect with your own personal
1 identity?

2 Would you be the same person you are today, if you had not picked
3 up your instrument or begun singing at some point in your young life?
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6 *Your table’s waiting: Stories looking for outlets*
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8 Since transition, I have started singing professionally again in my former area of
9 expertise, but I have not quit singing casually in the cabaret environment. Having
20 seen how powerful the experience was for me, I have even recently tried to bring
1 some of that environment into my own classical performances. Further, in my
2 applied voice studio, I encourage my students to use cabaret performances in this
3 self-exploratory way, often with great results.
4

5 It has certainly been a useful tool for my trans, queer and other minority
6 students, but it has also been a fantastic space for students who fit more easily
7 within societal norms. Everyone has questions about themselves, everyone has
8 doubts and fears to unpack. Occasionally, there are even students who discover
9 an aspect of themselves through this kind of casual performance that they did not
know they possessed.

30 While I have talked about cabaret in the context of allowing avocational musi-
1 cians an outlet for expression and exploration, these singers are not the only group
2 to benefit. An unexpected facet of cabaret performance has been the way in which
3 it has helped the professional singers in my studio tackle their own issues with
4 performance anxiety. Through low-stakes performance, in genres in which they
5 have less experience (and thus, less emotional baggage), they have been able to
6 find joy in performing that they previously lacked.
7

8 Good pedagogy is the art of facilitation, creating spaces where students can
9 experiment, experience and work out new skills and new ways of understand-
ing *for themselves*. And, in my experience, providing students with low-stakes,
40 non-judgmental outlets to perform music from *all* genres is both good pedagogy

in action and a critical part of creating confident, self-assured performers, regardless of whether they choose to pursue music vocationally or otherwise. Cabaret – with its openness, its joyous noise, the space it allows for imperfection – might just be the ideal environment for that ideal musician to flourish and come to life.

Self and performance anxiety

How do provisional identities and performance anxiety interact?

Literature on performance anxiety in musicians suggests that self-discrepancies (the perceived differences between one’s current self and one’s ideal self) are a high predictor of performance anxiety in musicians (Castiglione et al. 2018: 797–798).

Things to think about

How might exploration of self through low-stakes performance be a useful tool for vocational musicians?

Are the benefits of low-stakes performance different between vocational and avocational musicians?

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