

Report

A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF UNFOLDING SELF THROUGH SINGING

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ABSTRACT

The autonomic nervous system (ANS) is linked to the Unconscious, a relationship which has been therapeutically addressed with autogenic training, sometimes leading to transcendent experiences. The ANS is also involved in stored traumatic experiences and must be addressed for the release of stored trauma. Bodily storage of trauma can also involve the vocal apparatus. This report briefly describes a pedagogy of singing that involves the ANS and that lead this writer into an unexpected transcendent experience of self.

KEYWORDS: Autonomic nervous system, vocal, singing

The autonomic nervous system (ANS), with its balanced sympathetic and parasympathic aspects, has become a fascinating topic for me ever since encountering the work of Elmer and Alyce Green in autogenic training and intentional self-regulation of the ANS.¹ Their findings were counter to what I had learned in medical school, namely, that the ANS is unconscious and involuntary. Later I met Robert Scaer, M.D., and after reading his first book, came to appreciate the role of the ANS in stored traumatic experience.² Most recently I have learned of a relationship between the ANS and the act of singing, particularly a certain kind of singing, which was a surprise discovery for me this past spring.

One of my interests is the study of singing. I work with a voice teacher named Richard Conrad who early in his career recorded with Joan Sutherland, Marilyn Horne, and Richard Bonyng.³ In mid-career Richard's voice was severely injured in a mugging incident. During the long search for help in rehabilitating his voice, he discovered a small music institute near Darmstadt, Germany in the little village of Lichtenberg. It is called the Lichtenberger Institut für Gesang und Instrumentalspiel, in English, the Lichtenberg Institute of Singing and Instrumental Music. It was founded by a woman named Gisela Rohmert who originally studied to be an opera singer. She had a fabulous voice, but the opera houses always seemed to find reasons not to hire her. Finally she gave up and turned her attention to the study of how vocal sound is actually made. She is married to the former director of a famous technology school in Darmstadt, rather like MIT. His field was ergonomics. Hence, she developed what came to be called a functional methodology for singing. She discovered that when the whole vocal apparatus is in play, including all of the resonances from all of the vibrating surfaces of the mucous membranes from the bronchi to the eustachian tubes and sinuses of the head, as well as the bones beneath, certain harmonics are produced which she calls "brillianz" in German or "ring" or "singer's formant." A complex pattern of harmonic overtones is produced, and it is this that appears to directly communicate emotion to the listener.

Richard Conrad tells the story of hearing Birgit Nilsson sing one and a half words of a Wagner aria at which point he burst into tears. Nilsson had this kind of sound. Curiously, Gisela Rohmert found that it is difficult to make this kind of sound voluntarily. One has to get out of the way after activating the process. It's a little like letting the body "sing" you instead of you "doing"

the singing. I have heard of meditators reaching a certain point where it seems like the body breathes you instead of you doing the breathing. Frau Rohmert now sometimes refers to her method as the method of Unsinging. Take the loudspeaker out of the sound, she says. Take the doing out of the doing.

I had gone with Richard to Lichtenberg a few times to study with Frau Rohmert and had come to realize that she was reaching deep inside for clues to this method. For instance, while simply singing “ah-oh-ah” on one pitch, she asked me to imagine walking barefoot through a forest over damp fallen leaves. When I did this, the sound changed. Being curious, I had to ask her what happened. She said that the soles of the feet are an interface between the body and the earth, and, hologram-like, recapitulate other interfaces or anatomic divisions in the body such as the pelvic floor, the diaphragm, the apposed vocal cords, the soft palate, the ear drums, etc. I thought this was brilliant. She was getting at the anatomy of singing through the Unconscious and the body’s innate reflexes. As I continued to work with her, it seemed that her pedagogy went ever deeper and more inward. Finally one day I said to her that surely she must be trying to teach us to make contact with the Soul in the act of singing. She agreed, but said she didn’t like to use such words because many people who are deeply searching behave rather like cows grazing in this or that spiritual pasture. They attach to the words and never really integrate the process experientially. She also said that after discovering this relationship of sound and soul, nothing disturbed her anymore. To me that sounded like a sustained parasympathetic-dominated state of autonomic quietness!

After a gap of four years I returned to Lichtenberg this last spring and was astonished to now hear Frau Rohmert talking about the autonomic nervous system. It has long been clear to me that people store trauma in their vocal mechanism, and the serious student of singing will encounter all sorts of resistances to the process of building an integrated vocal technique. This now makes sense to me after working with the ideas of Robert Scaer together with the experiences I had while attending the Theta Training workshop at ISSSEEM in 2005. The ANS is involved with stored trauma, and the ANS is involved with singing. Whether or not this perception helped me with my own process, I do not know, but this time my personal experience with singing was remarkable. Richard and I had been attending each other’s lessons in order to be able to help each other when we returned home.

Since he is the professional, the focus seemed to be very much on his process, understandably. I, on the other hand, wasn't sure how well I was actually doing, or whether Frau Rohmert was just teaching me because I was there. By the end of the week I said to myself that it had been a most interesting experience, that I had learned much and had harvested many new ideas, and that was sufficient. I didn't give up, but I gave up striving.

Then, during our last session, while Richard was singing, Gisela suddenly stopped to illustrate her concept of inwardly oriented sound production by playing a simple passage from Schumann on the piano. First she played it with the usual outward orientation, and it was beautiful, simply because it is beautiful music. It sounded like any concert pianist might have played it, with accomplished delicacy and nuance. Then she shifted inward, became deeply quiet (autonomically, I would now say) and played it again. This time it was ravishing and heartbreakingly beautiful. I simply had to interrupt and comment. She responded by saying that, yes, it was more beautiful, but the listener also has to become deeply receptive to appreciate it. Perhaps this entrained me into a deep state of autonomic quietness, or maybe it simply opened up my soul, as if that were such a simple feat. But whatever the case, when it came my turn to sing, things began to fall into place with unusual ease.

This work is highly intersubjective, and I sensed Frau Rohmert becoming intensely involved in the process. Finally she said, now I can send you back to America with a good conscience. Then she began rapidly going through exercises over which she had labored with Richard, at which point Richard exclaimed, he's doing it better than I. I was embarrassed, but it didn't kill the experience. Suddenly inner and outer and objective and subjective all became one. I was making the sound and the sound was making me. I was sound. I was vibration. There was no time. The vastness of infinity opened up and was not frightening. I had become a Source that needed no mirroring. I realized I had reached a state like none other that I had ever experienced. I had no needs. I felt intimately close to everyone, but needed nothing from them. I simply was, and Being possessed it's own justification. Death seemed utterly irrelevant in this state, and I was very, very happy. I felt that it had been worth all the difficult experiences of my life, indeed, worth living my whole life for these 30 timeless minutes of a new and vastly expanded self-

sense. The experience also seemed to help me with some of my “western” arguments with Buddhism. I was blissful and one with bliss, but not dissolved into bliss. I was not ego driven, yet I was Self which possessed identity and will. The idea of killing the ego, or that there is no self, like death, also seemed irrelevant, even absurd. I also felt that this state is the birthright of all human beings.

It was obviously a very compelling experience which left me with many thoughts and questions. Could it be that we can begin to talk about a psychophysiology of transcendence? I know that Elmer Green has regarded theta brainwave training as “transcendence-of-the-gods training.”⁵ When and why and how do breakthroughs occur, if and when they do? Does a secure ego actually need to be developed as a necessary “launching pad?” Can one actually train for transcendence? How is this done without ego-striving? Is there a method of “untraining” for transcendence?

I do not know the answers to these questions, but I do know that my intuitive sense from this experience of singing tells me that the potential for transcendence lies within us all.

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REFERENCES & NOTES

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