

Project Outcome Report

With generous funding from the Miller Arts Scholars, I was able to spend my 2016 summer focusing on two fields that are very important to both me as an artist and a student. Part of my summer was spent shadowing speech pathologists at the Riverside Rehabilitation clinic in Newport News, Virginia. The other component of my project led me to Bethesda where I participated in the Bethesda Summer Music Festival and was cast as a lead and supporting lead in both of the productions (one opera, one musical theater, respectively). My major purpose of this project was to 1) improve my voice techniques and abilities as well as my competence in working with casts/ensembles on a production and 2) to observe the common vocal practices of my peers both over the summer, but especially at UVA, where I am very involved in the music and arts department.

Before departing for the programs, I also met with Professor Michele Kisliuk, who provided interesting insight from her musical ethnography perspective, about the various aesthetics of music and the voice around the world. With her guidance, I elected to deviate from my original proposition and include a slide or two pointing out these variances in perceptions of voice aesthetics- what sounds best, what is most desirable- in various countries and regions of the world. I had not previously considered this approach and, while it was not the main focus of my final presentation or studies over the summer, it was fundamental to how I approached my final survey that I distributed to the student body at UVA. I ended up including a question pertaining to qualities that the survey participants admire and emphasize most (whether in their own performance as an artist or as an audience member).

The first part of my summer was spent, as mentioned above, studying with and shadowing a speech pathologist. I had intended on only shadowing Ann Cyptar, a voice speech pathologist. A voice speech pathologist focuses mainly on, as suggested by the title, speech issues pertaining to the larynx and vocal folds themselves. With Mrs. Cyptar, I was able to view not only coaching sessions, during which she offers therapy in the form of practicing, homework, and modeling healthy speech, but also the switching of several laryngectomy tubes. A laryngectomy occurs when the larynx is entirely removed, often as a result of throat/neck cancer. Laryngectomees may speak through an electric probe that is held to the exterior of the throat and picks up on the vibrations of the inner throat, or, more often, have a stoma and a laryngectomy tube of some sort. This stoma is a hole leading to the trachea within which a tube is often placed. Laryngectomees may then hold a finger up to the tube and speak through a glottal voice, produced not by air vibrating through the vocal folds (which have been removed), but through air moving through the vocal and nasal cavities and covering the stoma, forcing the air to move through these cavities. I also have the bonus of seeing other patients, like a survivor of throat cancer who did not have her larynx removed, but struggled greatly with swallowing; we conducted a swallow test (using substances of varying viscosity and an x-ray machine to watch the fluids/solids as she swallowed). The funds from arts scholars helped pay for gas and any extra costs with this shadowing. It was one of the most rewarding experiences of my life because, from Mrs. Cyptar's work, I was able to not only further my understanding as a student of speech pathology but, more importantly to this grant and arguably to my passions in life, my understanding of the voice as an instrument. The lessons learned from watching therapy sessions- with patients from mild hoarseness to little-to-no speaking abilities due to nodules- were invaluable.

The second part of my project included another amazing experience. I got to perform as two of my favorite characters in opera/musical theater history: Susanna in *Le Nozze di Figaro* by Mozart and Carrie in *Carousel* by Rodgers and Hammerstein. Both of these roles were challenging to me in their own way, but so rewarding. I loved both of the characters and the opportunity to partake in an ensemble with performances of varying ages (high schools up to post-grad adults). This was part of the Bethesda Summer Music Festival, which I auditioned for again and am hoping to be part of again this summer, 2017. [I have a video of the performance that is available to view upon request of both my aria and my solo in the opera and the musical.]



(Pictured left: Cherubino and Susanna (Anya and myself); Picture center: Susanna and the Count (myself and Alberto); Pictured right: Susanna and Susanna (we shared the role, each performing on separate nights (myself and Emily))

Originally, my intention with this project was to:

“[document and interview] the various singers I meet, all of whom have a vast range of years of experience with vocal performance, and [draw] conclusions about the importance of vocal health and the techniques presented by Speech Pathologists and voice coaches. I will also be doing research, with Mrs. Cyptar, on certain “vocal health myths” and seeing if singers are aware of the validity of these possible myths. In my outcome report, I will be presenting my findings on these vocal health myths. I would be open to presenting this information as a sort of seminar, teaching other singers and anyone who speaks often about the proper care of the voice. My main arguments would be that whether you sing or not, vocal health must be observed in order to prevent overuse and my goal is to provide singers and public speakers a clear list of what works, and what doesn’t.”

I ended up shifting my goals a bit, though I believe I have stayed true to my original intention of finding and reporting on singers/performers and more general audiences (non-singers/performers) perceptions of the voice and how they use it. Once I returned to school, I

continued studying voice as a part of the new Performance Concentration at UVA. As a result of the work I did over the summer, I feel more secure and capable as an actress and a singer. This semester alone I have begun my transition from Mozart (who is still my first opera love regardless!) soubrette arias, to more dramatic lyrics soprano repertoire, such as studying Mimi from *La Bohème* by Puccini. I have also continued my Speech Pathology studies, this year taking both Anatomy & Physiology and Phonetics, both very important not only as an SLP but as a singer. I continued to research as well.

My project has come to its peak and culmination with a survey that I sent out (found here: https://docs.google.com/a/virginia.edu/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScffY1R_JOH9lz2ImtrpZzRgXdUhWIJLfZIG2_wTNrcughQMg/viewform) to various UVA organizations: University Singers, Phi Sigma Pi Honor Fraternity, and Hoos In Treble A Capella, as well as individuals (111 participants total). 63% of participants had experience with the voice, either as a singer, SLP student, public speaker, and so on; of this 63%, 57.6% had been singing for 9+ years. My group was, in its nature, skewed to a more vocally-educated group

With the results of this survey, I came to realize that many students, especially of the voice, are more conscious than I had anticipated. Both of my true/false questions that were meant to test the knowledge of vocal health were answered primarily correctly; the few incorrect answers typically came from those with less voice experience. The question that caused a bit more trouble was “True or False: Vocal Polyps/Nodules typically come from singing rather than speaking.” Only 55% of participants correctly answered FALSE. [FALSE because: Speaking can be just as detrimental to your voice as singing (often more). In many cases, reports of vocal polyps/nodules actually occur mostly in professions that include large amounts of speaking. This can include sales people, professors, and so on. This is likely as a result of the fact that many singers/actors do take voice classes and take care to not over use the voice. It is very easy to speak incorrectly (too loud, using glottal fry/the Kim Kardashian voice sound, too often, etc.) and typically singing incorrectly, as a professional or student, is more often corrected than speaking incorrectly.]

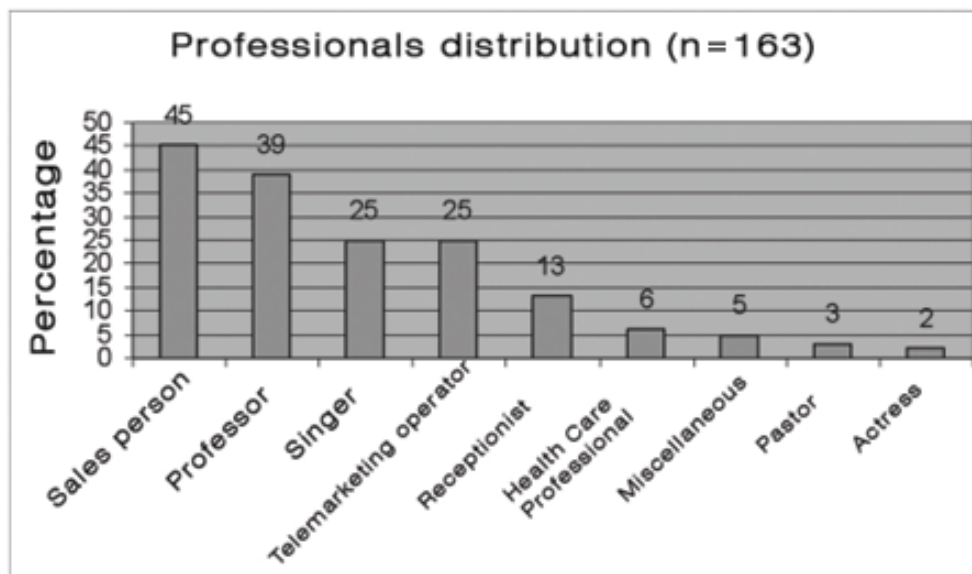


Chart 1. Professional voice users seen at the HCFMUSP voice clinic.

(http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?pid=s0034-72992007000100005&script=sci_arttext&tlng=en)

In regards to aesthetics, my hypothesis- that voices of a darker timbre are valued in our society- were validated. The most popular vocal timbre (bright, dark, either) was dark by over 50% (53.6%). Interestingly enough, brighter timbre had the lowest vote (19.1%). This contrasts starkly with the vocal priorities of a group, that Ms. Kisliuk suggested I research, called the Baka who yodel-sing both for communication in working and socially. In this society, resonant- typically more bright- voices are prioritized both for communication through their environment and for general aesthetics. The differences are amazing, but only confirm that, no matter what sound is preferred, vocal communication (through speech or singing) are prized and valued in almost all societies.

(https://www.lawrence.edu/conservatory/areas_of_study/musicology/con_brio/baka)

This project was a pleasure in that it combined my two greatest passions- Speech Pathology and Music- and allowed me to participate actively in both, even during the summer. I feel that I was challenged and stimulated in both field and this experience has only deepened my desire to continue performing and studying the voice as a system. I am so looking forward to future endeavors in both fields, both in my remaining time at UVA and endeavors after undergraduate studies have concluded. I am so thankful to be an Art Scholar and to have the opportunity to receive funding that allows me to pursue projects and performances that I otherwise might not be able to.

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