

Laurie's Story

My Singing Voice

by Laurie Sue Shelton

Welcome to the Toronto Listening Centre web site. My name is Laurie Shelton and I'd be happy to share with you a bit of my vocal history, my 1996 summer at the Listening Centre, and the immense changes and discoveries I continue to enjoy.

The Problem

I have always wanted to sing, to be a singer. I am not dyslexic, although in the area of singing I certainly felt vocally dyslexic.... "There simply must be a missing key, some 'magical' technique," I thought."I definitely lack something, most probably (I was ultimately forced to conclude) a great voice... or any voice at all...." Mine seemed less than wonderful. My teachers were never happy, I was rarely cast for shows, my body was extremely tense everywhere (the options were "tight" or "limp"). Vocal "strangling" was a major problem for me. I couldn't understand how singers knew what their voices were like--bright, dark, wobbly, dramatic, etc.--without taping their sound. I couldn't understand how singers, especially those with voices I didn't really like (high frequencies bothered me) could feel so good about their singing. For me, singing was a constant guessing game. Every time I triumphantly thought, "Now I'm finally singing correctly!" I was crushed to discover, yet again, how wrong I was, how disappointingly terrible my singing remained: wobbly, overly dark, throaty, the diction mangled, and always, far too much work. I simply could not tell when I approached a more balanced sound production. Whether or not my ears were covered or uncovered, the sound remained basically the same. To myself, I sounded like a 6-year-old. I never heard my own voice echoing from the back of auditoriums, or even filling them. Quite by accident, while rehearsing an Easter cantata solo, my hands placed by my ears on my cheekbones in an attempt to hear any part of my sound, I suddenly heard my voice, my own voice riding the auditorium acoustics. I cried uncontrollably for twenty minutes....

A specialist said I was describing bone conduction hearing loss, possibly because of a bike tire exploding in my face when I was 14, or perhaps because a nerve was not functioning properly. No mechanical hearing problems were diagnosed.

My voice teacher recommended the Listening Centre as a last resort. "Take the training or study musicology," she said. She had nothing more to offer me. And she had tried everything.... I was desperate; what did I have to lose?

The Program

Because I have cousins in Ontario, I commuted back and forth from their house to a subway parking lot, where I caught the downtown subway to the Listening Centre. Hearing/listening tests were used to identify my own unique hearing "curve" and to decide on the best programmatic approach. (Although everything at the Centre concerns listening/hearing issues, voice lessons are the responsibility of one's own teacher.) Paul Madaule, director of the Listening Centre, scheduled consultations to answer any questions and to assess my progress. I quickly discovered that the deep changes I experienced required lots of sleep, and that the many wonderful opportunities for sightseeing in Toronto were also helpful!

At first, the work consisted of "passive" listening. Each day, while relaxing on a mat, I listened for 2 1/2 hours to specially filtered Mozart concerto music through headphones. For me, the Tomatis "electronic

ear” was the auditory equivalent of a strobe light for the eyes. The muscles of my inner ears began to contract and release, like the opening and closing of a fist. After a few days, I found myself sleeping a lot, even intensely, during these sessions. In the subways I noticed that my balance was off, that I felt much closer to the tracks than I actually was. When Paul Madaule felt I was ready, active listening was added to the passive listening. Wearing headphones, I sang simple four-note Gregorian chant sequences on various vowels into a microphone, my own voice filtered to increase my awareness of the higher frequencies. I also read out loud into a microphone with the same frequency-filtered vocal sound.

During the first 15-day session I was asked not to practice at all so that my ears could “open naturally”. Then I began singing for short periods with the “new” ears. Special attention was paid to vibration in the neck vertebrae while speaking. Placing a hand on the back of the neck helped.

On my own, I found that I could hear better by raising my arms above and in front of my head (as in a child’s “I’m a little sunflower” song) or by placing my hands near the TM joint (the jaw hinge) along my cheekbones near the ears. Strangely, the more I accessed bone-conducted sound, the better I could access external (air-conducted) sound....

After a 4-week break in New York to allow integration of all that I’d learned, I returned for my second 15-day session. Most of this work involved active listening, employing longer vocal phrases and sequence patterns. Singing with words was added. When time allowed, I also practiced and experimented a little on my own once the scheduled tapes for the day were completed.

Did It Work?

The better my hearing became, the more I could “hear” or “listen” to my body. I began identifying and eliminating tensions on my own, tensions of which I had been totally unaware, in spite of my many Feldenkrais movement lessons, tensions which no longer seemed part of my true vocal sound. I felt like a completely different person. During that first “post-Tomatis” year, I completed my masters degree in performance at Ithaca College and, during the summer, studied with Elizabeth Mannion in Santa Barbara at the Summer Vocal Institute. I wrote and published papers in the NATS “Journal of Singing” (May/June, 1997; January/February, 1998), and this summer (1998), attended Ann Baltz’ Opera Works program in Princeton, NJ. In November I will sing a recital at L’Abri in Switzerland.

Although about two years have passed since my work at the Listening Centre, I continue to gain better hearing sensations and new awarenesses of my voice, which has grown in size, range, ease of production, and, in particular, the joy and expressive freedom so vital for healthy singing and artistic communication. As singing grows easier, the voice grows more beautiful, the simple outpouring of my own emotions along the curve of a composer’s phrase. The intense frustration is gone. I no longer retain great amounts of tension in my body, and I am much more relaxed with myself and with others.

Am I Cured?

Yes and no. I forget about my ears for long periods of time, but occasionally begin to have trouble (singing becomes a bit mysterious again and everything feels like too much work). Then I simply spend time listening with headphones to works such as “Phantom of the Opera” where high frequencies are particularly rich (i.e., the Phantom commands Christina to sing for him and she sequences higher and higher to her E-alt pitch). On my radios the high frequencies are turned up and the middle and low ones turned down. These “boosts” are needed less and less frequently now, perhaps about every six months or so. I suspect that the major muscle in my ear remained too relaxed after the tire accident (which happens to

protect the ear from sudden damaging noise) and never regained its flexibility. So I just exercise these muscles occasionally. I suspect that this inner ear “muscle flexibility” is what the Listening Centre work regained for me; at least, that’s my own sense of how my hearing problems were resolved.

Will the Tomatis Method Work For You?

I don’t know what Listening Centre sessions will do for you. Everyone is unique. No two people are alike. But I do know that for me, the Toronto Listening Centre was the best and only decision I could have made. The results have far exceeded my expectations; how could I ever imagine what I’d never experienced? Initially I was afraid the program would not work. It was honestly a fearful thing, because if the program failed for me, I had no other options....

If you struggle with problems similar to mine, know that you are not alone in these hearing/listening/singing issues. Personally, I always felt so alone with my struggles. I began to believe that I was totally untalented and yet, the drive to sing was so great that I simply could not quit... (in spite of some who undoubtedly wished that I would!).

Once ear function improves, time to adjust and to relearn previously inaccessible vocal technique is necessary. I’m still learning. The point is, now I CAN learn. Now I KNOW that I have a voice... and so much to sing, to say, to share....

“...Singing does not begin and end with a composer’s printed page:

Singing begins and ends with life.”