



# The role of play singing in teaching students sight singing and ear training

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**Abstract.** In China, solfeggio is a compulsory course for each music student. The purpose of subject is to enhance musical memory, develop inner hearing and cultivate a correct sense of rhythm and intonation, so that students can acquire a rich musical vocabulary and proficient score-reading skills(Chen, 2006)<sup>5</sup>. In short, they developed a deep insight into music (Baragwanath, 2020)<sup>1</sup>. While play singing is an integral part, which is beneficial for learners to improve their musicianship. However, it might be ignored by some educators. In France, the aim of learning accompaniment is to train students' ability of accompany the class of solfeggi(Carlisi, 2023)<sup>3</sup>. Accordingly, for students who major in sight singing and ear training, not only they ought to develop professional skills, but also learn how to apply this into teaching as their future career.

**Keywords:** Sight singing and ear training students, playing and singing, musical style, teaching

## 1 Introduction

Play singing, which is an art form integrating singing and playing, is an important element in the teaching of sight singing and ear training, and it has considerable significance for cultivating students' skills and musicality. As such, it is a compulsory course for students of sight singing and ear training. Play singing has many benefits for the students: they can accumulate a certain amount of repertoire; they can improve their professional skills; and they can demonstrate better what they have been taught. In addition, a lot of practice in play singing can deepen students' understanding of different musical styles, which improves their ability to sight read. Therefore, it would be beneficial to include play singing in sight reading courses in the future. Furthermore, play singing helps to guide the students in understanding and identifying the various elements of music and how they are woven together, and also the various styles of repertoire and how to use them in an actual musical performance. However, many majors suffer from a lack of accumulation of repertoire and inappropriate interpretation of works. This paper lists the styles of playing repertoire that should be explored by those teaching sight singing and ear training majors, and suggests specific measures for their application to teaching.

## 2 Introduction to play singing

With the development of China's economy and culture, the country has also made a big breakthrough in music education. Sight singing and ear training is an important branch of music, and its teaching has undergone a step change in recent years, both in terms of teaching quality and teaching methods. Thus, it has contributed to the improvement of students' musical literacy. As a result, play singing, an art form unique to the discipline of sight singing and ear training, has gradually entered the classroom as an extremely important element of sight singing and ear training teaching. As the name implies, play singing is playing and singing at the same time (Yu, 2019)<sup>12</sup>.

## 3 Aspects of play singing

There are three aspects of play singing that require consideration. First, the score should be read carefully. This is a prerequisite for giving a quality rendition of the piece. The relationship between the vocals and the piano (dominant and polyphonic) should be analysed to identify any difficult parts quickly. Then, a preliminary judgement about the mood and style of the piece needs to be made by observing how the vocals and the piano blend together in the rise and fall of the music. Further, the terminology on the score should not be ignored (Cai & Hou, 2013)<sup>2</sup>. These points help performers to understand the composer's emotions better and interpret the connotations of the work.

Second, attention should be paid to the harmonic function. Harmony is an important part of a piece of music, suggesting the time and style in which the piece was composed (Yu, 2019)<sup>12</sup>. For example, harmony in the classical period focused on function and regular progressions. It also emphasized main, subordinate and genus chords, and transposition to closely related keys. Harmony in the romantic period emphasized irregular progressions and transposition to distantly related keys. Impressionist music concentrated more on harmonic colours, weakened the harmonic functions used in the classical and romantic periods, and used a lot of second and third progressions.

Third, listening to the relationship between the human voice and the piano is vital. In play singing, the vocals and the piano are an inseparable whole, and it is necessary to listen to the volume of both, combine the terms of expression and make intensity comparisons in order to achieve a dynamic balance between the two, understand the emotional ups and downs of the music, and avoid an interpretation of the piece that is too flat (Luo, 2013)<sup>9</sup>.

## 4 The meaning of play singing

The significance of play singing is threefold: it helps students to understand intonation better; it aids their perception of the emotional changes in a piece; and it builds polyphonic thinking, thereby improving skills in reading a complete score.

First, it helps students to become more aware of intonation. In contrast to traditional monophonic sight singing, play singing with a piano accompaniment allows the performer to adjust the pitch. However, in some repertoires, the pitch of the human voice and the piano are not exactly the same, and they form certain interval relationships (e.g. concordant intervals or even discordant intervals). Thus, performers are required to attend to the different pitches and form the correct interval relationships, putting higher demands on their awareness of intonation (Min, 2021)<sup>10</sup>.

Second, it helps students to perceive the changing mood of the musical piece. In an actual sung work, the piano accompaniment is an important part of the performance because it evokes the emotional ups and downs of the piece, as does the piano playing in play singing. Importantly, the harmony between the voice and the piano, as a vital part of the structural force of the music, plays a decisive role in moving the piece forward and driving changes in other musical elements such as tempo, intensity and range. Compared with monophonic sight reading, play singing appears to be more three-dimensional and full-bodied, and it interprets the musical image of the piece more fully (Cai & Hou, 2013)<sup>2</sup>.

In addition, play singing can help students to build polyphonic thinking and improve their skills in reading a complete score. As mentioned earlier, there are two important components in play singing, that is, the human voice and the piano. Play singing requires performers to listen to the volume of both to achieve a balance in acoustics so that the two parts echo and complement each other (Cai & Hou, 2013)<sup>2</sup>. However, play singing is not the only thing that can help students to improve their skills in reading a score. It is also necessary to browse through as many piano and vocal scores as possible, and to learn to read multiline scores, especially for composition and examination purposes.

## 5 Different musical styles of the study

Although the importance of play singing is mentioned in many articles, the diversity of play singing styles is seldom mentioned. The lack of student repertoires and the inconsistency of students' singing styles have been noted. This indicates that improving students' quality of singing is something that should be addressed as a matter of urgency. Based on this starting point, the author has summarized five common styles according to their chronology.

### (1) Baroque period

The works of the baroque period are mainly polyphonic in style, and the balance between the vocal parts is the key to the high quality of the pieces. Because of the polyphonic nature of the works, the performance should pay attention to the connection and echo between the phrases. The polyphonic techniques used in the works should be analysed beforehand and the themes to be emphasized in the performance highlighted (Guo, 2019)<sup>6</sup>.

### (2) Classical period

The works of the classical period are characterized by a simple, clear structure and convey a sense of balance and order. Their harmonies are mostly in regular progres-

sions, and there is usually a clear melody line above a subordinate choral accompaniment. These works should be performed with a sense of phrasing and passage, and with a unified tempo to present the complete structure of the piece (Chen, 2010)<sup>4</sup>.

### (3) Romantic period

Influenced by the development of society, romantic music emphasized the expression of personal emotions, and the subject matter of the works was broader. The musical elements in the works of this period such as harmony, range, intensity and tempo notation are also richer than those of the previous two styles (Liu, 2003)<sup>8</sup>. When performing this type of work, it is necessary to understand the background to the composition and the emotions of the composer. If songs are to be sung, it is also necessary to pay attention to the content and context of the lyrics.

### (4) Impressionist period

In this period, composers no longer used traditional functional harmonies, but made extensive use of colourful harmonies and employed whole-tone scales and pentatonic modulations to develop melodies, making them delicate, hazy and ambiguous, producing a sense of hiddenness and improbability (Tan, 2009)<sup>11</sup>. As a result, the impressionist period's stunning works are more innovative in terms of tone, and they place new demands on students.

### (5) Modern music

With the development of the economy, politics and culture, music diversified considerably. Thus, in the 20th century, modern music was born. Traditional tonalities and harmonies gradually disintegrated, and composers often composed in pan-tonal, atonal and twelve-tone sequences. The works of this period are mainly atonal, rhythmically complex and rich in variations (Liu, 2013)<sup>7</sup>.

## 6 Specific teaching methods

Through training in play singing, not only can students improve their own musician-ship, they can also substantially improve their ability to understand pitch, rhythm and musical processing, and consolidate their basic skills in sight singing. Sight singing and ear training majors offer a grounding in the musical styles of different periods. However, there is little mention in the literature of the way in which play singing can be used in the teaching of different music majors. This requires an understanding of the learning goals of each major so that play singing can be used in a targeted manner. In the author's opinion, singing majors should primarily understand the first three styles of music, performance majors should focus on the first four, with appropriate exposure to contemporary styles, and theory majors should master all five styles.

### (I) Teaching of singing majors

Emphasis is placed on basic training interspersed with a knowledge of harmony and polyphony. From a sight singing perspective, sight singing pieces from the baroque, classical and romantic periods can be selected to give students a preliminary understanding of the three styles so they can incorporate their characteristics in practice. For example, the baroque style allows students to try singing in parts, focusing on vocal balance and developing polyphonic thinking, reflecting the characteristics of

the style very well. For ear training, harmonies can be analysed while listening to selected pieces.

#### (II) Teaching of performance specialties

In terms of sight reading, students should aim to play sing in multiple key signatures and multiscore signatures to familiarize themselves with tonalities and notation. Therefore, selecting different styles of play singing pieces will broaden their sight reading experience. With regard to ear training, they can use multimedia technology to train in multiple timbres and select solo fragments from pieces played by different instruments to understand and distinguish various timbres. Listening carefully to some orchestral pieces and recording the melodies of the lead instruments helps students studying performance majors to coordinate their instruments better in music practice.

#### (III) Teaching of theoretical specialties

For sight singing, training in pan-tonality and tonelessness (including polyphonic sight singing or playing) should be given, with an emphasis on improving students' accuracy in identifying pitch and rhythm. For ear training, listening to tuneless melodies can be helpful, or orchestral fragments can be useful for establishing a sense of orchestra. Because the theory majors have a better foundation, teaching could involve students listening to and then shifting the chord connections in distantly related key transpositions to improve the acuity of harmony, or creating some distantly related transposed harmonic connections for consolidation purposes.

## 7 Conclusion

Play singing plays an important role in training students in sight singing and ear training. Understanding, learning and performing various styles of play singing consolidates their professional skills and broadens their musical horizons. Through such training, they can increase their repertoire and accumulate more pieces to use when performing, laying a solid foundation for their future development. In addition, the teaching programmes should apply theory to practice and be based on the future goals of each different music profession to stimulate students' interest in learning. Play singing can also fill the gap in the training provision for sight singing and ear training. A teacher could create a variety of materials for use, providing some reference for improving teaching methods, and tailor them to the different music disciplines, thereby introducing more practical aspects into China's mainly theoretical sight singing and ear training teaching, and injecting new momentum into the development of the discipline.

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