

The following is an excerpt from the book:

Insight Improvisation

Melding Meditation, Theater, and Therapy for Self-Exploration, Healing, and Empowerment

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To learn more, please visit <http://www.insightimprov.org>.

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Singing

In Roy Hart Theatre both men and women push their voices beyond bass and soprano in search of the human voice, as opposed to the specialized voice.

In this work the singer can penetrate more and more the depths of his body and so achieve a new and until now unknown sound, to which the singer listens as if he were listening to a strange voice. But only if the singer experiences that “it” sings, is the state of childhood in the adult restituted, the real active state of creation in the human being. Only then can he be sure that the “it” in the listener hears too and thus art fulfills the same function as religion which, by touching the depth in the human being, leads to the height.

— Roy Hart

(excerpts from writings, 1972 and 1961)

Why Singing?

Many of us are afraid of singing in public. We may sing along with a radio or digital player, or sing in the shower, but when it comes to sharing our voice with others,

we hesitate. We may recall our experience in fifth grade music class, when we shyly mouthed the words. Instead, we listen with admiration as professional singers impress us with their range, power, and technique.

But singing should not be the domain of a few “talented” people. It is our birthright, one of the most joyous aspects of being human. Nearly all peoples engage in singing, and with such great variety that no two cultures or countries sound the same. When we sing, we breathe more deeply, connect with our feelings, and open our hearts with the vibration of sound.

I was not one of those kids who were told to mouth the words. I could sing a little, well enough to be in my junior high school chorus and sing “Copacabana” and “Bohemian Rhapsody.” I was a Soprano I in seventh grade. But once my voice changed that was it for singing—until I met the Roy Hart Theater, 15 years later. In my first Roy Hart workshop, I was asked to use the full range of my voice, from the very highest falsetto to the lowest bass notes. I was amazed at what my voice could do.

When we speak about singing in Insight Improvisation, we are not talking about performing songs written by others, but rather of singing as an in-the-moment, alive activity, unplanned. Although melody is possible, it is not required. The voice can go places it’s never been before—the highest squeaks, rumbling bass notes, scratchy whispers, honking nasal tones, operatic swells—accompanied by words that emerge from the body, from inner imagery, inspired and stretched by sound, gesture, and movement.

Singing in Insight Improv is supported by mindfulness, in the form of a present-moment awareness of sound, as well as choicelessness, opening up to and being inspired by information coming through all the different sensory channels, as well as inner

imagery and emotion. Underlying both of these kinds of awareness is *metta*, which starts with lovingkindness for yourself, as you take the risk to open your voice and heart to sing.

Singing		
Warmups	Applications	FreeSong
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Moving & Humming</i> ▪ <i>Chords</i> ▪ <i>Jams</i> ▪ <i>One-Liners</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Shared Vipassana</i> ▪ <i>Naked Improvisation</i> ▪ <i>Amplification</i> ▪ <i>The Three States</i> ▪ <i>Working with Text</i> ▪ <i>Storytelling</i> ▪ <i>Role Stream & Scene Stream</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>The Basic Exercise</i> ▪ <i>Duet/Trio</i>

The approach to singing in this chapter was inspired by the teachings of the Roy Hart Theatre, with special thanks to Ivan Midderigh, Saule Ryan, and Carol Mendelsohn; the vocal techniques of Kristin Linklater; and the work of Kermit Dunkelberg, Kim Mancuso, and my fellow-actors in Pilgrim Theatre.

Individual Warm-up: Moving and Humming

This sequence can be used when working alone, or as a group warm-up where individuals work independently and simultaneously, guided by the facilitator:

Begin with a brief sitting meditation, and transition into authentic movement.

As you follow your body in the movement, allow yourself to inhale slowly and deeply. You might imagine that you can breathe in through the top of your head, and breathe the air all the way down to the tips of your toes. Or choose a specific part of the body to send each in-breath to, and relax that part on the out-breath.

Next, on the out-breath, hum. At first it may be a somewhat small, quiet sound. Let it grow by allowing your lips to loosen and vibrate with the sound. (It may help you to start with a brief open sound, and then gently close the lips on it and let them buzz with the vibration: “Huh-hummmmm.”) Don’t worry about pitch—a single note may occur naturally, or the pitch might gradually fall or rise.

Hum until the breath naturally runs out. Then take a new inhalation and begin again. With each hum, notice where in the body you feel the vibration—initially it may be more in the lips, but as you focus in and relax more you may notice it in the throat, the chest, the belly, etc. As the body relaxes and vibration grows, the whole body can resonate.

Continue following your body, moving and humming, noticing what changes moment-by-moment, the different locations in the body where you sense vibration, and the different qualities of vibration as you change position. Notice what emotions, memories, or images arise as you move and hum.

If working alone, feel free to progress from humming to letting the sound out through your open mouth on a single, extended note—“Hu-hmmmm-maaaaaaaaahhhh...!” Notice the different sensorial and emotional qualities of projecting the sound outward. (To continue this solo progression, you can also adapt some of the ideas from Jams and One-Liners, described below.)

Humming Dialogue

In a workshop setting, the facilitator can extend the humming warm-up by having participants work in pairs:

“As you continue your movement, please come to silence for a few moments to hear the next instruction. Over the next minute or so, allow your movement to take you into proximity with one other person. This person will be your partner. It’s OK to cheat your eyes open a bit to find someone. Once you find them, continue your moving and humming, but this time in dialogue with the other person. You hum, and then listen for their hum. It goes back and forth. Allow the movement and sound to form a creative dance with your partner.”

Group Warm-up: Chords, Jams, and One-Liners

The warm-ups which follow work particularly well in a workshop setting, but can also be adapted to individual and peer work. What follows are instructions for the workshop facilitator.

Chords

Stand in a circle with the group, and introduce the sequence: “We’re going to continue our warm-ups with the voice by making some sounds together. The first kind of sound is a Chord. Each person will take a deep breath and on the out breath sing a single note. It doesn’t matter what note you choose. Together we will naturally form a chord.”

“When you sing your note, begin with a deep belly breath...” Model taking a deep belly breath, hands on the belly, and then, on the out-breath, sing a single note on

“Ahhhh....,” arms opening out and forward, palms up—as if the gesture were expressing the emergence of sound from the body.

“Be mindful of the in-breath, really feel the belly expand like a balloon. Then, notice what it’s like to follow the stream of sound from inside, up and out through the mouth—become aware of how the body and face vibrate. As others sing, notice the effect of their sounds as well. Allow your sound to last as long as your natural out-breath; don’t push beyond a single exhalation, nor stop the flow of sound prematurely.”

The group makes several chords together. Each person chooses a different pitch each time, so the chord that forms is never the same. (Individuals can also vary the vowel sound they are using: “ah,” “ay,” “ee,” “oh,” and “oo”.) When done at length, this activity can take on a meditative quality, slowing the pace of breathing and greatly heightening awareness. As the exercise proceeds, it often feels natural to let the eyes close, as the group can sense the beginning and end of each chord without seeing the arm gestures.

Afterwards, invite group members to briefly share their experience. Discuss the meditative nature of the exercise, as well as the musical details they noticed—e.g., harmony versus dissonance, or, how beats form with two pitches that are very close but not identical.

Jams

Jams are similar to Chords but with a new element: instead of singing a single note, each participant can vary their sound in any way they’d like.

Describe and model it before the group tries it: “Begin the same way as in Chords, taking a deep belly breath, and engaging vibration on the out-breath. But now you can

play with what emerges, following it to unexpected places. You can vary the sound as much as you like (rather than stick with only one pitch and one vowel sound), and allow your whole body to move with it. Changes in pitch, rhythm, and even adding consonants and pauses are all welcome: ‘OooooooooLAlalala. Mmmaaaahhh!’ As with Chords, you are done when your single breath naturally runs out—don’t cut it off early or push it further.”

“As you do this exercise, let 90% of your focus be on listening to others, and only 10% on producing your own sound. You may do very little, just fitting your sound gently in with what is already happening. This exercise is a group experience, not a collection of individual solos. Let go of the idea of performing, and let this be a group meditation on sound, vibration, and the body.”

Try it several times with the group, coaching them on really listening to the group’s sound and maintaining that awareness as they add their own voice.

Dimensions of the Voice	
Pitch	Bass→Soprano
Volume	Whisper→Scream
Rhythm	Speed (Slow→Fast) Quality (Legato→Staccato) Pattern (e.g., ¾ time) Pause (Duration and Number)
Sound Quality	Resonators (Head, Face Mask, Nasal, Throat, Chest, Whole Body) Rough → Smooth
Enunciation	Fuzzy/Slurred → Clear, Sharp, Emphasizing consonants

Duet Jams, trios, etc. After the group has tried jams several times, introduce the duet version: two participants step into the circle, take a deep breath, and begin to jam, varying their voice in whatever way they like, all on a single breath. They can make eye

contact with one other, move, interact, and make physical contact. But when each person's breath runs out, they must come to stillness, and freeze, until the other person is also done. Then they both take a beat of silence, and then break the freeze. (The audience can respond with silent applause—waving their hands in appreciation.)

Listening, pausing, giving space to the other, and singing with—or in contrast to—the other are all important elements to be aware of. It's also fun to try this with trios, quartets, etc.

One-liners

Still standing in a circle with the group, introduce the final step in the progression: “Our last warm-up is called ‘One-liners’. One person whispers in another's ear a single line—a short sentence or phrase (something not too long to remember, and not a line from a song). The person who receives the line then takes a deep breath, steps forward, and sings the line, in a fully embodied way.” Demonstrate this by having someone whisper a short line in your ear, and then sing/improvise with that line.

“You are not limited to a single breath. Feel free to repeat syllables, words, and phrases as much as you like. You can make eye contact with the audience, or keep your eyes closed. The goal is to fully explore the line through song, using the entire range of your voice, letting your body and voice express the meaning of the words. What emerges is not necessarily a melody—it may be atonal, arrhythmic, not beautiful at all. If you aim for singing, you may sometimes rap or chant or make other sounds, and that's fine.”

“When you are finished, take a beat in silence, and the group will respond with silent applause. When you are singing it, do not worry about making the line clear to the group. You can tell them afterward what the line was if they didn't get it.”

Duet One-liners. After a few participants have tried one liners, it's fun to introduce the duet version. Now two participants whisper into the ears of two other participants. The singers begin at the same time, taking a deep breath and stepping forward into the circle. As they sing/explore their respective lines, they meet in the middle, and can interact, optionally using eye contact and/or physical contact. As with Duet Jams, really listening and giving space to the other is key, as is listening for opportunities to sing in unison, counterpoint, harmony or discord with the other person. This exercise can also be tried with trios and larger numbers.

Applications of Mindful Singing

Singing can be incorporated into many of the approaches discussed so far in this book, adding new dimensions of self-expression, emotional connection, and creativity. The variations described below can also serve as a bridge between the warm-ups above and the FreeSong exercise described later in this chapter.

Shared Vipassana

Beginning with authentic movement, opening to the six sense doors, the mover begins to *sing* aloud what he is noticing—including senses, inner imagery, thoughts, feelings, etc. The result is a kind of sung stream-of-consciousness, with the emotional quality of the singing amplifying the expression of what the improviser is discovering in each sense door.

Naked Improvisation

In the One-Minute Solo, the performer is given an added instruction: at some point during the minute, she must sing. What comes out can be surprising, funny, even beautiful.

Amplification

A form of Secondary Amplification: the performer enters, with the assignment to sing a song, using his full voice and body—it could be an actual song or an improvised song. What’s going on in the background: he must amplify whatever he notices in his voice and body. Because the singing itself is being amplified, the song quickly distorts and transforms, potentially changing rhythm, key, timbre, and emotional tone, going to unexpected and extreme places—grotesque, funny, and sometimes alarming.

The Three States

The movers substitute singing for speaking in a vocal variation on the Three States. However, instead of a dedicated “singer” role, or having strict rules about when each person can sing, it is best with singing to leave the structure open, allowing for simultaneous singing and the potential for harmony and dissonance.

Working with Text

The performer sings the text, rather than speaking it. At any time she can loop back and repeat syllables, words, and phrases. Through the repetition she may discover rhythms (and sometimes when aiming for singing a chant or rap may come out); she may also find a melody and/or sound quality that fit that passage and express it best. It may be

worthwhile recording these improvisations—sometimes a wonderful song can be discovered through improvising with a text in this way .

Storytelling

The storyteller sings everything—narration, character’s voices, etc. The use of rhythm, melody, and vocal timbre can add a great deal to the drama and energy of the story—the result may be a little like an opera, or a scene from a musical.

Role Stream and Scene Stream

As the improviser discovers a role through moving authentically, he embodies the role and *sings* as the role. Singing roles, and scenes, as they emerge from the body and inner imagery, can open the heart in unexpected ways. As the voice flows, characters tend to say more, and feel more—there’s more breath, and a tendency toward a less-censored, stream-of-consciousness style of delivery. Singing in a minor key for example, the improviser may discover the tragic nature of a role—being moved by the song, the improviser may be motivated to further explore that role’s narrative, and by doing so find resonance with a part of himself that has been hidden or unexpressed. *(In a similar way, singing is powerful and evocative when used with psolodrama. See “Further Exploration with Psolodrama” in Part III.)*

FreeSong

FreeSong is an open improvisation using singing as the vehicle. An amalgam of the various techniques described above, FreeSong can incorporate aspects of shared vipassana, one-minute solo, amplification, storytelling, and role/scene improvisation.

The Basic Exercise

This is a solo improvisation, with the audience as witness. The performer enters empty, with no plan of what will happen, aside from the intention to be present and to sing.

She begins standing, with eyes closed, relaxing and tuning into her body, noticing her breath.

She begins to sing, following inner imagery, sensations, and emotions, and allowing the voice and body to fully express whatever is happening—a mixture of the truth of what is happening right now, plus the imagination spurred on by images, metaphors, stories. She is actively letting go of her good ideas—“wouldn’t it be clever if…”—and instead is simply following the thread of her own body, voice, words, emotions, and inner imagery.

It’s important to be affected by one’s own singing, to be surprised by it, moved by it—and to let it influence the narrative that is emerging.

Notice melodic and rhythmic patterns that emerge and do not be afraid to repeat or develop them. However, beware of repeating words and phrases too many times, as this can be a way of avoiding moving forward—“treading water” rather than swimming deeper.

If speaking, as opposed to singing, happens, it's OK. Be mindful of how the speaking is different and what purpose it is serving, and then return to singing as soon as is appropriate for the emerging improvisation.

There is no judgment in FreeSong. There is no expectation to sound beautiful, or “good,” or professional, or in tune. You must allow yourself to be the worst singer who ever lived—and to produce sounds that are ugly, strange, off-key, rough, etc. By letting go of the need to sound good, you can free yourself to take the exploration anywhere it needs to go.

This exercise is on the edge between performance and personal process. You must find your own balance in negotiating this edge. Stay true to your own song, your own vision, while remaining open to the audience. When in doubt, err on the side of pleasing yourself, following your own process moment-by-moment, trusting that the audience will get what they get. If something remains a little mysterious or unclear to the audience, so be it. There is usually time afterward for performer and audience to share their impressions.

FreeSong Duet/Trio

In a FreeSong duet or trio, two or three performers begin onstage at the same time, eyes closed, listening deeply, mindful of the body and the breath.

At the beginning something small may happen—a hum from one or gentle rhythmic sound from another.

What emerges is a piece composed spontaneously together, comprised of separate threads, threads that may intertwine at times, at other times diverge or contrast.

Borrowing a little from the Three States exercise, the performers can make eye contact and/or physical contact with one another at any time.

On a sound level, partners listen to one another, create space, and invite interaction. Singing with—in unison or harmony with or in contrast to—is welcome.

In some cases, distinct characters or roles emerge. Feel free to explore these, but do not become stuck in them. Freeing up with physical movement can help.

FreeSong with a partner can be an extraordinary exercise. I have experienced a feeling of being truly in-synch with my partner, together creating something absolutely unique, with an intimate connection and a sense of wild fun and freedom.

Closing Thoughts

Improvised singing is a special activity in that it can tap into parts of us that we do not often connect with in day-to-day life: feelings of sadness, melancholy, or grief; a sense of purity, beauty, and the sacred; and impulses of strong rhythmic power and visceral connection with the earth—heights and depths which Roy Hart explored. Singing is like a direct two-way line to the heart, sparking feelings while also providing an open channel for expressing them. Combined with the mindful awareness and “being-mind” orientation of Insight Improvisation, singing opens up one’s imagination and creativity in potent and unique ways. My wish for you, the reader, is to be able to try the exercises in this chapter—to sing mindfully and explore what emerges—and to experience the power and magic for yourself.

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