

Bluebirds' serenade: On singing out of tune

Ati Metwaly, , Saturday 3 Jan 2015

The easiest natural thing to some, a completely impossible feat to others, the ability to sing in tune requires musical practice or education



Christmas and New Year are among the occasions that gather people, encouraging them to sing. And in this spirit, Egypt's popular English-language radio station, NileFM 104.2, released its own take on Mariah Carey's iconic hit "All I Want for Christmas." Starting on 8 December, the song, featuring NileFM's team, was aired repeatedly; three weeks into the launch of the video clip, over 5,000 people had viewed it.

On YouTube, the video came with the note, "A cover like no other!"

It is indeed an original version of the well-known song, one that generated mixed reviews from the station's fans. While many social media users praised the NileFM's efforts, some listeners were quick to notice the glitches in the experiment; as the days passed, the listeners' initial enthusiasm of course faded. At the heart of this joyful experience is a series of completely out-of-tune lines whose discordance does not require a sensitive ear to prove hurtful.

Taking into account that there is no musical or artistic intent here – this was just an outburst of festive energy, a karaoke event – it seems pointless, having pointed out the faults of the singing, to question NileFM further. Yet one is still compelled to ask why this excruciating exercise had to be aired to thousands so repeatedly.

One thing the trial to which the station subjected us brings to mind is the question of singing in tune: the

easiest natural thing to some, a completely impossible feat to others; it takes only a birthday party to understand what a nightmare even an eight-note song like “Happy Birthday” can bring out of untuneful mouths.

In his paper “The Care and Training of Adult Bluebirds”, published in the *Journal of Singing* in 2004, Marty Heresniak calls such creatures “bluebirds” — a coinage he defines as children or adults unable to sing in tune. Happily, as he points out, they are not a lost cause; and unless neurological issues are involved, the right musical and vocal training can remedy their defects.

Heresniak, who approaches the issue from the practical point of view, in the classroom, is supported by numerous studies that, over the last few decades, have laid the groundwork for understanding the relation between the brain and musicality. The question of musical ability and the reasons behind it is among the topics of interest to neuroscientists like the American Daniel Levitin and the British-American Oliver Sacks.

In his books, *This Is Your Brain On Music* and *The World in Six Songs*, Levitin uses scientific facts to analyse how the human brain is able to accrue music and the arts, with both genes and cognition playing a role in the process, and studies the emotional connection between music and the brain.

For his part, Sacks looks into a multitude of neurological conditions that bridge the brain and music. He sums up years of researches in a fascinating volume titled *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain*, which has been translated into over 25 languages — including Arabic.

“Our auditory systems, our nervous systems, are indeed exquisitely tuned for music. How much this is due to the intrinsic characteristics of music itself – its complex sonic patterns woven in time, its logic, its momentum, its unbreakable sequences, its insistent rhythms and repetitions, the mysterious way in which it embodies emotion and ‘will’ – and how much to special resonance, synchronizations, or feedbacks in the immensely complex, multi-level neural circuitry that underlines musical perception and replay, we do not know yet. But this wonderful machinery – perhaps it is so complex and highly developed – is vulnerable to various distortions, excesses and breakdowns.” Thus Sacks writes in the preface.

Further along he points out that, according to studies, only 10 percent of the world’s population have levels of musical inability in terms of tone-deafness (many of them do not even realise they are singing off-key); and a small fraction of those suffer from particularly unique conditions. These become Sacks’ case studies.

In the end the findings leave us puzzled. How come, with only a tiny percentage of people who have a neuro-medical excuse to sing out of tune, we are still surrounded by bluebirds? Why are those who sing correctly so few? And this is where researchers such as Levitin or Zoltan Kodaly (1882-1967) – a Hungarian composer, ethnomusicologist, pedagogue and founder of the Kodaly Method – step in with some answers and solutions.

Once medical conditions are eliminated, what we are left with is as simple as lack of practice and/or education. Though music accuracy can be a gift from nature, in many cases it is a learned skill, a fact that Heresniak approaches on practical level. Levitin supports Heresniak with his study “What Does It Mean to Be Musical?”, published by the Department of Psychology and Interdisciplinary Program in Neuroscience at McGill University in Montreal, Canada: “Although young children clearly start out with widely different musical abilities and interests, their actual achievements correlate most significantly with practice, hard work, and time on task, not with observed early potential. Self-reports of world-class musicians, as well as experimental studies, point strongly to the view that practice accounts for a significant proportion of the variance in who becomes an expert musician and who does not.”

Acquiring this skill often begins with unconscious practice when, as children, we sing for fun at home. Levitin notices that “the child raised in a musical household — regardless of her genotype — is almost certainly apt to receive more musical input, feedback, and encouragement than the child raised in a non-musical household.”

The process continues in kindergarten, where a child is guided by musically attentive educators, even before the schools step in with more advanced music curricula. It is interesting to note that, according to studies, toddlers usually confuse tempo, dynamics and pitch, terms which are too metaphoric for them. When we ask a toddler to sing a lower or higher note, what they usually do is sing the same note in a softer or louder tone. “During some stages of development, these children do not sense the pitch of their own voices and often sing loudly (and happily) off-key,” Heresniak quotes Robert Evans and Vernice Trousdale Nye’s paper “Music in the Elementary School”.

If left completely without guidance many children will continue having problems with either hearing the difference between different tones or imitating them, ending as grownup bluebirds, adults who need even more skillful teachers to deal with what some perceive as a “tin ear.”

Again, Heresniak notes, “For the great majority of out-of-tune singers who consider crossing the voice studio threshold, the singing teacher is exactly the right person to help correct the problem. A well-trained music educator has strategies to help such children... Most bluebird students can learn to match pitch.”

This is only one of the many examples of how attentive musical practice, first in the home and then at schools, affects future singing ability. Kodaly noticed for instance that toddlers do not differentiate between the rhythm of the words and the beat; they usually follow the words’ rhythm, not the musical beat.

The songs tailored for children where words parallel the beat do not emerge simply from the need for simplicity only, but also to help develop and boost musical practice. It is this strategy that helps young children to develop musical abilities and gradually sing longer passages in tune and expand their vocal range – from singing two notes to five, 10 etc. Having fun creating harmonies and adding a second and third voice in a musical gathering requires more advanced skills that are nonetheless still within the reach of anyone who loves to sing, whether gifted or trained.

The facts presented by researchers do not mean that children deprived of attentive musical practice will irrevocably become adult bluebirds. They do indicate however that in the communities, countries or regions where music education is not sufficiently practiced – as is the sad case of Egypt – the percentage of people who find it hard to recognise different tones, or who can hear them but cannot repeat them, will be higher than in places where attentive music practice is duly implemented.

To make the equation additionally difficult, Egypt’s poor music education in schools is only topped by a challenging auditory environment. According to the aforementioned studies by Heresniak, loud environmental sounds reaching the ear are among the reasons behind inability to discern pitch. Yet this would be a topic for another article.

It may not be magic but becoming a reasonable social singer does require some work. Though, as Heresniak notes, “bluebirds may not make a go of it as professional singers... One never knows, does one? Some of my bluebirds have...” Scientists have proved that musical practice at a young age accompanied by attentive parents and then music educators is among the fundamental tools to ensure that, at any stage of life, singing the eight notes of Happy Birthday or even Carey’s very challenging “All I Want for Christmas”

will not be painful to the ears.

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