



## Singing and Children & Young People

PLEASE READ THE WHOLE OF THIS DOCUMENT  
BEFORE CONSIDERING CONTACTING ME.  
IT IS *VERY RARE* FOR ME TO TAKE ON YOUNG STUDENTS,  
AND MY REQUIREMENTS ARE STRICT.

### Where to start

Unfortunately, it is very hard to find a teacher who genuinely knows what and how to teach a child singing.

In almost 30 years of teaching, working with many choirs, going into many schools as an advisor, teaching singing teachers, classroom teachers, high profile professional choir trainers and conductors, and musicians and directors of children's theatre companies, my experience has been that the level of knowledge on how to help young people with their voices is extremely poor. Usually, the best one can hope for is that the teacher/director doesn't give damaging advice, and is simply largely ineffective; they may help develop a child's general confidence and musical ability, and pleasure in making music, but any development in the child's vocal ability can be attributed to growing older and getting more singing and performing experience, rather than acquiring any greater genuine understanding of vocal technique.

There are many teachers who teach bad technique, and have no idea they are doing so. Many adults encourage children to 'belt' out a tune – musical theatre, 'showstopper' style, with arms flung wide -, and assume that if the voice is loud and clear, and in tune, then everything is fine. It isn't. Parents, friends, teachers believe that if the young singer can win an audience over with a moving rendition of a song down a microphone with a good amplification system, then a child must have a special talent. 99% of the time, they don't. Most think they are in the 1%. They aren't. I see those same students a few years later (at 16, 18, or university age) when their voices and confidence are completely shot to pieces. It is reckless to let them go on endless talent shows, however many prizes they may win. The people awarding them prizes *do not know about the development of the young voice.*

Sadly, my view is that ***children should not join stage schools or youth music theatres.*** The style of singing and performing encouraged by these organisations creates huge vocal technique problems later on that are very hard to put right, and singers who have come through this route find that they have confidence in only a very limited number types of song or performing roles. From my position in the profession, I see the 'successful' singers behind the scenes coming to me to try and keep their voices going when they are regularly suffering from voice strain and performance anxiety – their early confidence has gradually been draining away, and they have learned to put on a brave face whilst secretly becoming very unhappy and worried. The bad habits are learned young. Some students come to me when they are just starting or finishing university; some have a Grade 8 under their belt. Unfortunately, even with a very insecure vocal technique, it is possible to get a Grade 8 if you are strong musically and have a some confidence as a performer. University choral scholars and music undergraduates have some of the biggest vocal problems to untangle; they have achieved a certain amount of success, but have been big fish in a small pond. And they can find it very challenging to

have to unlearn bad habits, and let go of their 'sound' they have got used to making and being recognised for.

Parents contact me regularly, apologising that they might be pushy. They say that they want a professional's advice on their child's voice and potential, and are quite prepared to be told that there is nothing special there. In reality, most actually secretly believe their child has got the 'X Factor', and are looking forward to hearing me confirm it. However, children with apparently wonderful early talent often peak in those early years, and nothing special comes of it later on. And there are apparently very unpromising voices or personalities who actually bloom, given the right nurturing, and the right approach from themselves. I do not believe anyone can spot a future talent – life has a habit of throwing too many surprises for anyone to have a crystal ball. But I can tell who I think I can teach, and who I think will benefit from my approach. Slow, patient cultivation is the key to having any kind of successful future.

I care hugely for all the singers I teach. I care a great deal that they develop a technique and temperament that will enable them to sing well into their old age (which is far beyond what most popular singers can do). This means that I treat a student as taking on an apprenticeship with me. It is a long term commitment from both sides, with conditions that we both must honour. Those who work with me discover that it has many of the same qualities as the teacher-student relationship one finds in the traditional martial arts training. It is primarily an education of the *person*, through the medium of voice skills training.

**The only young students I will teach have to be prepared to have lessons with me for at least a few months without taking on new singing commitments in shows, auditions, talent competitions, exams, one-off fund raisers or performances, including singing for events for family and friends.**

It takes at least a few months to establish some of the basic skills and understanding, and, above all, the mindset to stand a chance of building an initial foundation as a competent singer with healthy vocal technique. Students who are too eager to show off their vocal skills, and are caught up in the excitement of performing and the positive feedback they might get from friends, family and others, are not suitable students for my way of working. After those first few months, we have to assess whether the student has acquired enough knowledge to start singing to others without compromising that technique because of the demands of performance pressure and audience requirements, or a need to impress or 'succeed'. The greater the student's urgency and impatience to perform, or the bigger the gaps between lessons, the longer it takes before they can get to genuine performance readiness. A student who chooses to take short cuts to performance rather than planning the process with me is effectively electing not to continue lessons with me.

## Getting the right balance

Many teachers (including myself) are hesitant about teaching singing to really young people one-to-one as there is a balance to be struck between teaching technique and building skills, and 'entertaining' a younger pupil who may want to do more singing of songs than working on the technical side. I like to focus on helping a singer build their understanding of their 'instrument' so that they can apply this knowledge to different types of singing – whatever style they choose. Older singers tend to find these opportunities for themselves: non-auditioned or auditioned choirs, music theatre, open mic nights and karaoke, folk sessions, singing in a band. Younger singers, if they do not have opportunities to sing at school, can be a bit stuck – so keeping the motivation going can be a challenge, as they just have the singing lesson. The teacher wants to teach technique, and the child wants to get on with singing songs and sounding like their favourite singer as quickly as possible.

## Local singing opportunities for young people

I think it's important that pupils have good opportunities to build their singing skills in between lessons, perhaps with a young choir. For young people, these group experiences can provide the ideal framework for developing their voices, musicianship and confidence simultaneously. Music making, especially singing, is a social activity, something we do with other people. This is the oxygen required for keeping the learning and motivation alive.

Is this a contradiction of my earlier comments about the probationary period of not performing? No. Singing with a choir, and staying out of the solo performance limelight can help a young singer find their voice in the early stages. And the type of singing required does not damage in the way that singing in shows or bands can.

## Beware music teachers who don't know what they're doing

Unfortunately, my experience of almost all the stage schools (and even many experienced choral conductors) I have come across is that the level of proper technical knowledge of singing amongst the tutors is low, though they often innocently believe otherwise, and are able to convince their students of this. Many tutors give instructions for singing that are actually counter-productive; young students (and their parents) going to well-informed singing teachers have been shocked at the misleading ideas they have been given by tutors at school, and how quickly they can learn to sing more effectively under proper instruction. Students coming out of stage schools often have quite a punchy, apparently confident way of performing with very dodgy and inadequate vocal technique, so it is understandable that parents want to find a good private singing teacher for their children.

Perhaps it's worth having one or two questions up your sleeve to check out what a teacher knows. My rule of thumb is that a teacher needs to know a) *exactly* and *in detail* what is happening anatomically, how it should affect the sound, and why, b) why a particular exercise or instruction is good for the singer, c) how to explain this clearly and unpatronisingly to anyone, young or old.

## The right age to start

Singing can be a lifelong pleasure. The sing voice can last into our 80s if we learn to sing properly. For many people, without the technical knowledge, they feel their vocal powers diminish many years earlier than this (although it's possible to reverse this problem in later years with some lessons). So it's worth acquiring some good basic knowledge early on. Children can enjoy singing from just a few years old.

For one-to-one work, my gut feeling is that unless the child is, say in a church choir or equivalent, surrounded by older peers who sing, 12 is absolutely the youngest age for individual lessons. In practice, I tend to start students at 16 at the earliest. Boys can enjoy singing before puberty, and a wise choir trainer can help them stay engaged through the change of voice, though it is sometimes easier for a boy to take a year or so out and then come back to singing. GCSE and A level age students have enjoyed building singing into their performance element of the exam, having time to develop some feel for the craft before they have to produce their exam performance.

Bear in mind also that it can be confusing and hard for a youngster to maintain the motivation if they are told by choir trainers or tutors at school to do things that the singing teacher advises against.

I have taught singers as young as 9 or 10, but these have had exceptional temperament in their readiness to accept the apprenticeship model I offer.

## Copying your favourite singer

Many students – adult as well as younger ones – are inspired by well-known singers. This is a mixed blessing. It's wonderful that people find inspiration from hearing others sing. At the same time, many, many popular singers have very incomplete vocal technique, and behind the scenes, have significant vocal problems that teachers and speech therapy clinics are helping them address on an ongoing basis. Many popular singers do not sing beyond their 40s because of vocal burnout. And even some that last longer are doing so *despite* unreliable or unhealthy technique.

Some young singers can quite successfully mimic other singers. They may be mimicking technique that is good for the original singer but bad for the imitator. But the original singer may have dodgy technique that is then copied. This is *very* widespread!

## Find somewhere to sing - regularly

My first choice would be to find a good peer group setting for the young person to sing in, and to think twice about opting for one-to-one singing lessons, unless the young person has the temperament for the discipline of technique in preference to acquiring much repertoire in the early stages, or to having opportunities to perform. Personally, I am not a fan of using graded exams as an artificial framework for motivating a student – the work inevitably becomes syllabus and deadline driven, instead of organically unfolding within the timescale of the young person's development.

## Consultation

I occasionally offer a consultation for a young student. I can give you and your child some feedback on their singing, and what they might need to look after their voice and make the most of it given their age. If you want to do that, I like to meet at least one of the parents at the same time. In the meeting, we begin with all three of us having a short chat. Then your child and I spend about 30 minutes working together alone; they and I chat a bit about their interest in singing, their music etc, and then I ask them to sing some exercises, or maybe a short song if they want to bring one, and I can coach them for a short while.

After this, you are invited back into the room for us all to chat again, and I can explain to you the work we have done in the session, and we can talk about what next steps might be useful for your child. I really can't guarantee that I would take your child on as a student, but I hope that the consultation would be useful to you. Sessions are currently charged at £50 per hour (August 2013)<sup>1</sup>, and our meeting would be about 45 to 60 minutes, depending on the age of your child.

## Eligibility for lessons

My criteria for taking a student on include that they:

1. have developed a reasonable level of musical fluency, reliability and confidence (perhaps by playing an instrument)
2. have some basic mastery of their voice (perhaps by being in a choir, band with friends, or musical)
3. demonstrate apt temperament (capacity for self reflection, patience, willingness to persist long term)
4. organise themselves to be making music with others regularly (so that they practise using the skills learned in lessons)

---

<sup>1</sup> This rate may be different at the time when you enquire about lessons, or when the lessons begin.

5. demonstrate self organisation and initiative in approaching their own vocal development

The voice quality in a first meeting is not always a reliable guide of potential or ability – voice quality can improve dramatically with the right coaching and practice. This is why I look for personal qualities in potential students. When I take students on, preference is given to those who can commit to at least fortnightly, if not weekly, lessons – learning the coordination of muscular and mental skills to master singing requires these. My focus in order of priority is:

1. vocal mastery - singing single notes with good posture, breathing, tuning and no strain; intervals and scales in the same efficient way; singing a wider pitch range, and simple melodies, all without yet introducing words
2. learning songs / repertoire - singing melodies without words; then singing with words as well, which adds to the muscular complexity; not performing at this stage
3. performance skills, alongside competitions, auditions, exams or career development - these must come last

In my experience, students who try to do stage 2 or 3 too early fail to master the stage 1 skills fully, which means that they can't achieve what they want to in the stage 2 & 3 skills.