

Children and Voice Lessons

The purpose for this informational link is more important than ever. Since New Centre for the Arts opened two months ago I have received many phone calls for voice lessons for children between the ages of 8 and 13.

As a professional singer and teacher of voice, what am I to do? This challenge is not just taking place in Fairfield County, Connecticut I assure you. Recent shows on television and Broadway have brought interest in singing to our youth. It is time to think about how to assist them on their journey. To sit idly by and allow the singers of tomorrow to become silent due to vocal damage acquired in youth would be irresponsible.

This request is a concern for me as a teacher of voice. As most people know and understand, physical development at this age does not lend itself to the vocal technique that a teenager or adult would experience in a lesson. Moreover, a voice lesson for a young person of this age group is now a new and uncharted territory for many teachers. So, it is important that parents and teachers understand the purpose a voice lesson serves a child between the ages of 8 and 13.

My role as a voice teacher for this age group is about vocal health, helping the student to develop good vocal habits that will remain with them as their voices mature. Students and parents have come to me requesting training due to the interest their child has in musical theatre or popular music. The scenario generally goes like this: Suzie goes to see a new Broadway show and then convinces her parents to purchase the CD of the show. The child then sings day and night to a voice on a recording that is 20 years older than she, not to mention this singer may not be the best role model for a new singer to imitate. (*see bottom of page for list of singers)

Children learn to sing through imitation. They will imitate any quality of singing they hear. It is therefore essential that the child have an excellent vocal model to emulate, in order to fix in the inner ear the beautiful sound of which a child's voice is capable. The example should have a voice that is resonant, forward, free, clear, relaxed, with a minimum of vibrato and with flawless intonation.

Teachers also need to address repertoire. We cannot separate appropriate repertoire from vocal development. Good repertoire enhances and develops a beautiful tone quality. Bad repertoire undermines development. Children must also do as much unaccompanied singing as possible to strengthen their inner ear.

Tension in a lesson will cause children to tighten up and sing sharp. A too relaxed lesson, on the other hand, will cause the child to lose their concentration and focus, and sing flat.

Key Points:

*A positive and productive environment must be created. The teacher's speaking voice must be encouraging and confident, not harsh or discouraging.

*Good posture.

*The purpose of vocal instruction should be to develop the voice to sound even and strong throughout its entire range. Aim for uniformity of sound from the top down, not from the bottom up. Mix the head voice down. You'll never produce beautiful, natural singing by forcing the chest voice up.

*An "inner smile" from the singer helps promote beautiful tone, since it raises the soft palate and relaxes the jaw.

*Never force or push a child's voice beyond its limitations. It will develop gradually if the proper foundations are laid through good training.

*Singing is a physical sensation. I often have a child put his or her hands on my face, under my eyes, to feel the vibrations. Because the vocal "instrument" cannot be seen, it is essential to use our other senses more acutely.

*Breath support. Not something to be taken lightly, but we do not want to overwhelm a child with breath work. An awareness of correct and healthy breathing as well as "games" that can be played to encourage efficient breathing can be useful and fun for a child. You can implement the small to large dog pant and lip or tongues trills. A long, sustained "hiss." Or hold a candle six inches away and sustaining a sung vowel such as "oo" without causing the flame to flicker.

*Keep your sense of humor and remember that one chooses to sing because of the joy that it brings!

In Harmony,
Lynn Paulella Beard, Director
New Centre for the Arts

****Voices to listen to: (list will expand. Check back.)**

Julie Andrews	Robert Cuccioli	Judy Kuhn
Brian Stokes Mitchell	Audra McDonald	Dawn Upshaw
Josh Groban	Kelli O'Hara	Darius deHaas
Shirley Jones	Renee Fleming	Joe Cassidy
Rebecca Luker	Sutton Foster	Theresa McCarthy
Christiane Noll	Liz Callaway	Julia Murney

