



A RESPONSIBILITY TO YOUNG VOICES

by Peggy Bennett

If I were to ask you, "Under what conditions does your singing voice sound its *best*?" what would you answer?

"In the shower."
"When I'm rested."
"In a certain key."
"When I'm relaxed."
"When I'm confident about what I'm singing."
"When I sing with a 'good' singer."
"When no one is listening."
All of the above?

Or what if I asked the opposite question—"When does your singing sound its *worst*?" When you are nervous, uncomfortable, threatened, afraid, tired, ill, embarrassed, bored, or have allergies? Being aware of the conditions that work for or against a natural, desirable vocal tone is the first step in creating a classroom environment conducive to voice education.

Responsibility to voices

I am an instrumentalist. Although I have taught children and adults using a vocal approach to studying music for fifteen years, only recently have I realized how little attention I have paid to voices in my classrooms. Where once I saw my own voice and the students' voices simply as necessary instruments for producing songs and communicating instructions and ideas, I now realize that I have a very critical responsibility with my students: to help them find and maintain a comfortable, healthy speaking and singing voice. Awareness of this responsibility has led me to reconsider ways voices are used in music classes.

If asked, can you stand up and ... prove that your major concern as a professional entrusted with young voices ... has always been and will always

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be the well-being of the instruments you work with?

Do you think you presently would be judged "guilty" or "not guilty" if standing accused of injuring—temporarily or permanently—one of the voices you accepted to use in one of your projects?¹

The issues of choral singing, diction, technical voice information, and vocal abuse are not addressed here. Rather, ideas, teaching strategies, and activities will be offered that can contribute to vocal awareness, production, and maintenance for the nonselect general music student.

A conducive environment

Students' voices should be treated as carefully as their minds and bodies are treated. Psychological stress seems to have an effect on a person's voice. "A vocal athlete's reaction to environmental stress can affect her/his singing ability. A common term for stress reaction is 'fight or flight response.'"² The positive, accepting attitude the teacher models toward students and voices is most effective if the selected songs and activities are complementary to that attitude.

Positive attitudes to model include a curiosity about and a respect for voices that express interest in what voices can do, not how "good" they sound; a stance that discourages laughing or teasing when voices are studied; and an acceptance of each voice as it is, recognizing that "all voices are good and are in different stages of learning, growing, and improving."³

Complementary songs are those that have variety in tonal and rhythmic patterns; are simple in their

tonal progressions; closely resemble natural speech in their tonal and rhythmic setting of words; are appealing and interesting for children to sing; and have a vitality not diminished by extended repetition.

Complementary activities motivate students to participate; provide opportunities for students to offer ideas and see their ideas implemented; give students responsibility in the ongoing flow and "working" of the group and the activity; focus students on the song or activity for maximum learning; and offer movement to encourage, not impede, healthy vocal production and flow of the song.

Such compliments as, "That sounds good," or "What a pretty voice you have," are seldom appropriate for voice education. Instead, more appropriate feedback encourages and supports, rather than compliments:

"I can hear that your voice sounds more relaxed today."

"It sounds as if your voice is not accustomed to that range."

"Your voice sounded like you were really supporting it with energy this time."

Again, the curiosity for what a voice can do and appreciation of a student's efforts in exploring his or her voice underlie the teacher attitude being modeled for the class. Consistency with this attitude can offer a student the emotional safety necessary for him to explore the potential of his voice in the presence of his classmates.

Phases of voice education

Five phases seem to appear in vocal awareness. Although these phases are somewhat sequential, progress through them may move very quickly. In voice education, each student:

1. experiments with the quality and range possibilities of his voice
2. describes how his voice feels as he experiments, where he feels his voice on his body as he experiments, and how his and others'

voices sound as they experiment

3. matches quality and range of the teacher and other students in singing or speaking activities

4. decides which labels best fit a given vocal production of his and another's voice (for instance, "high," "medium," or "low"; "loud," "medium," or "quiet")

5. produces a particular sound according to a given label ("high," "soft," "smooth," and so on)

6. produces a specific pitch to match one given by another voice or instrument

Unfortunately, the sequence for working with children's voices frequently begins at Step 6: "Okay, class, sing this note," or, "Tommy, you're not matching my pitch, sing higher." Typically, pitch matching has been seen as an essential prerequisite skill to music instruction. So valued has this ability been to many general music teachers that students' musical abilities have often been summarized in terms of whether or not they match pitch.

The ability to sing one pitch to match precisely another produced by voice or instrument may be more surprising to find than the inability to do so. There are many mechanical reasons for the inability to match pitches, and the ear seldom is the culprit. While matching pitch is certainly one of the goals of voice education, it is not the first step—nor the ultimate step—of vocal health, production, and awareness.

Another common strategy in teaching singing is to emphasize the concepts of "high" and "low" in relation to pitch level. Perhaps it is time to reevaluate this strategy, as the term "high" refers to the visual representation of notes on the staff—not a workable concept for many young children. Physically, "higher" notes on the piano are to the right of "lower" notes; on violin, they are to the player's left; on guitar, they are *beneath* the "lower" notes. Acoustically, "higher" actually means "faster." Physiologically, "higher" does not correctly de-

1. Axel Theimer, "What If...? Some Thoughts for Us to Whom Young Voices Are Entrusted," *The Choral Journal*, January 1982, 31.

2. Leon Thurman, "Putting Horses Before Carts: When Choral Singing Hurts Voices," *The Choral Journal*, April 1983, 23.

3. Anna Peter Langness, "The Child Voice," 16. (Unpublished research paper available from the author: Music Study Services, P.O. Box 4665, Englewood, CO 80155, 1983).

scribe what happens in the vocal mechanism as higher pitches are produced. Further, the image of reading and the postural tension that can result from acting out high and low notes can impede proper functioning of the vocal mechanism to produce these sounds.

Instead of eliminating such terms as "high" or "low" from teaching strategies used with young children, teachers should work toward this fifth phase of development through the students' perceptions (see Step 4). Perhaps teachers have forced a framework of extremes or opposites ("high" versus "low") onto a simple activity like singing that does not need such a confining structure.

First. experimentation

In this initial phase of voice exploration, the speaking voice may be a more comfortable starting point than the singing voice. In addition, some research indicates that the speaking voice may be a more logical beginning for voice education than the singing voice. Betty Atterbury summarized these conclusions in an article in *MEJ*:

[A. Oren] Gould emphasized in his conclusion that a most important initial step in teaching singing was to enable children to differentiate register changes in their speaking voices. This finding was also emphasized by two later authors, Emlyn Roberts and Ann D. M. Davies in their research with ninety nonsingers. They wrote that the breakthrough with individual nonsingers seemed to occur when the children realized they could control the pitch fluctuation in their own voices.⁴

One exercise for exploring the speaking voice in quality and register involves the recitation of a familiar song or poem—for instance, "Mary Had a Little Lamb."

Have the students speak the poem, not necessarily trying to stay

together. After the class has simply recited the poem a few times, suggest imagery to guide them to different types of vocal production through interpretation:

"This time as you say the poem, pretend you are a very important actor, alone on the stage, very confident, enjoying your time in the spotlight."

"Now pretend you are a very shy student approaching a stern principal."

"Pretend you are a story-teller trying to make the story come alive for his audience."

Have all students practice speaking as a group with each new image; offering several repetitions gives students ample opportunity to explore their interpretations. In addition, using a familiar song or poem gives a definite framework for the voice exploration. Unlike some activities where environmental sounds are explored, the familiar text gives a predictable, predetermined stopping point.

When students are ready, have them give their own interpretation for the group. This may be a difficult or embarrassing step for some students. Encouraging, supportive interest from the teacher can create the necessary components of social comfort and studious curiosity for the student "soloists."

"Todd, I heard an interesting voice from you that time. Would you let us all listen?"

"I'd like to hear several ideas, so when I gesture to you, give us your interpretation. We won't respond or comment until we have heard from four or five of you."

And, for getting started with this type of activity in an unusually inhibited class:

"Just so you can get accustomed to speaking alone for the group, we'll close our eyes while we listen. When I tap your shoulder, give us your own interpretation."

Anna Peter Langness, in her writings on the child voice, emphasizes:

Individuals are invited and encouraged, never threatened nor forced, to speak

⁴ Betty Atterbury, "Are You Really Teaching Children How to Sing?" *Music Educators Journal* 70, no. 8, April 1984, 44.



or sing alone! Assume that if a student is not ready at this moment, he/she may respond later this song, this period, next class, or next week. Always extend the invitation, or find an opportunity when the entire class is not listening.⁶

Step two: Description

Encourage students to comment on what they heard and how they could describe the voices—how it felt to produce certain voices and how it sounded as they listened. Take time to allow students to explain their comments, demonstrate what they mean, and express varying points of view. As stated earlier, their statements should not express liking or dislike.

"Dawn, how could you describe what you heard in Sandy's voice that time? [Student responds.] How would you describe it, Sean? [Student responds.] Well, Sandy, you've heard various people describe what they heard in your voice; why don't you tell us how it *felt* for you to speak that way?"

When a student's response is vague, unclear, or seemingly "off the wall," give him more opportunity to clarify:

"Joe, I'm not quite sure what you are saying. Could you tell me a little more about what you mean?"

"Oh, Jennifer, I am curious about what you just said. Let me listen again so I can make sure I'm understanding you."

"Todd, can you tell me more about what you're saying? [Pause; no response.] Well, maybe you just need more thinking time to put your thoughts into words. Be sure to let me know when you can tell me more about your idea."

If student verbalizations of their own ideas are uncommon for the classroom, a little time may be needed for them

1. to realize that the teacher is asking for their opinions and perceptions rather than for a "correct" answer
2. to listen to and study responses

5. Langness, 17.

of other students, in addition to those of the teacher

3. to appreciate "playing with voices" as a serious yet enjoyable study in music education
4. to value similar answers given by several students but articulated in various ways

Once again, the teacher is an invaluable model for each of these adjustments.

Matching quality and range

Antiphonal response is a strategy that works well for imitating speaking and singing voices. With a song well known to the group, a leader begins speaking or singing the words. At various points in the text, the leader stops speaking and the group must fill in the missing words. Whenever the leader comes back in with the song, the group must stop speaking or singing. Unlike an echoing activity, antiphonal response recreates the song intact from beginning to end. It is more a game of "fill in the blanks" than one of "do what I do." The aim is to have as smooth and musical a transition as possible between the leader and followers.

After the students have explored and described the various speaking voices produced with imaging on "Mary Had a Little Lamb," name one student to be the leader and have the rest of the class respond antiphonally. Instruct the students to try to match the vocal quality and range of the leader.

Some laughing or teasing may occur as students hear and use voices in ways new to them. Although laughter may simply reflect embarrassment or delight, it should be minimized. The teacher can recognize the class's sense of humor and at the same time limit the students' laughter:

"I know it sounds comical to us to use these voices, and rather surprising, too. However, during voice study, we cannot laugh. If we laugh, it may be too easy for a person to think we're laughing at *them*, and we don't want to do that."

Continual reinforcement of the "no laughing" rule may be necessary in beginning voice study.

Humor and acknowledgement of some discomfort helps the children relax and respond freely. "This is kinda crazy!" or "What IS this?" may be patterns that express what the children are thinking, and [they allow] that feeling to be acceptable without interfering with the progress of the work.⁷

As a variety of vocal ranges and qualities are experienced among the group, students are again encouraged to describe how the voices felt and sounded. Discussing these two perceptions separately accepts that one student may feel his vocal production as normal, and another may hear that same production as a quiet voice. Likewise, a student may *hear* a voice as being loud, yet when he matches that voice with his own, it may not *feel* loud.

Making use of students' comments on their perceptions heightens vocal awareness. Rather than assign descriptors to students' voices, the teacher allows students to discover the breadth of range and quality in the human voice. One of the principles suggested for learning to use the singing voice satisfactorily is "the child must learn to hear, judge, and control his own voice."⁸ Among the concepts and associated motor skills necessary to young children's singing abilities, is "a concept of the difference between high sounds and low sounds and the motor skill of controlling the pitch levels of the voice in speech and song."⁹

Deciding on labels

As stated earlier, students may not find the concepts of "high" and "low" in reference to musical pitches and ranges as obvious as we teachers might think. When discussing vocal ranges and qualities,

6. Langness, 23.

7. Eida Franklin and David Franklin, "The Uncertain Singer," *Update* 1, 3, Spring 1983, 4.

8. Franklin and Franklin, 4.

the teacher can eventually introduce the question of:

"Laura, when you sang [spoke] that, did it *feel* like you used your high voice, low voice, or medium voice? [Student responds.] Pam, did Laura's voice sound high, medium or low to you?"

"High," "low," "medium," "medium high," and "medium low" are frameworks of register decided upon by the students about their own voices. The variety of descriptors also recognizes the difficulty of placing any sound into discrete categories of high and low. In this way, voice education with regard to blending registers and establishing comfortable ranges becomes individualized instruction within the group setting. These personal range descriptors also become frames of reference for the next step in voice education.

Matching sound to label

After students have offered their own labels for various qualities of their and other's voices, transition to responding to a request for a specific sound evolves easily.

"Jonathan, was that your high, medium, or low voice I heard that time?"

[Response: "Low."] Well, how would it sound if you used your high voice to sing [speak] that? [Response: Student sings in high voice.] Wow! I heard the difference! Now, I wonder what your medium voice would sound like. Can you show me?"

For this type of voice study, short phrases (for example, "the lamb was sure to go" or "who lived on Drury Lane") are often more appropriate than entire songs or poems. Also, when a student seems stuck in a particular range (usually low), quickly insert an echoing activity. The teacher models a quickly paced, energetic speaking voice, accompanied by gestures.

"Chris, let's try this. See if you can echo me. We're on top of a mountain, and we're thrilled to be there. 'Hello-o-o-o' [Response.] 'Hello-o-o-o, is anybody there?' [Response.] 'What is your name?'"

During this improvisation, a spontaneity of response to the student's echoes is required of the teacher. Repeating, varying, stretching words and syllables, and accompanying these with gestures and facial expressions can help the student exercise in a range unfamiliar to his voice. If exercise becomes too fo-



cused on the one student, have the entire class join in. As soon as the student can, have him use his high voice without a teacher model.

"Can you tell me what your voice had to do in order to get that high sound?"

"Did your high voice feel any different from your low voice? How?"

Eventually, the use of such questions can aid the student in monitoring his own vocal production for singing or speaking in class and for practice at home. Betty Atterbury says, "A vital element in successful primary singing instruction is the consistent inclusion of some activities that enable children to differentiate their individual voice registers."⁹

Producing a given pitch

This final step in voice education is so common it needs little explanation. Probably most of our class time focuses on this step. Inadequate experience in any of the previous five steps, however, can impede success with "matching pitch."

Some elementary music teachers may work with students through seven years of physical growth and development. Growth and development, so obvious in external characteristics, also occur within the vocal mechanism. "Matching pitch" may be a skill that varies according to physical growth. As children grow in and out of voice coordination—ear-throat coordination—it is imperative that their voices and voice images are treated with care.

The living voice

Voices are made of living tissue. They need to be as carefully exercised, nourished, warmed-up, explored, utilized, and maintained as the rest of our bodies.

The vocal "instrument" is not an instrument, although we use voices for that purpose. Musical instruments are inanimate objects which are used as

extensions of human beings. Guitars do not catch colds. Tuba players do not play their tubas to carry on daily conversation.

Voices are human beings. They are made up of living tissues which are part of the whole human being's physical and psychical processes. When misused they may fall into "disrepair." Replacement voices cannot be purchased at the local music store, and there is no such thing as "trade-ins." Vocal "repair" is possible, up to a point, but loaners for temporary use while repair is underway are not possible.¹⁰

Voices also represent who we are to ourselves and to those around us. Robbing someone of confidence in—or of the opportunity to become confident in—his singing or speaking voice, by intended or implied remarks, diminishes his quality of life.

And so what, you're saying? You don't seek power, fame, or glory? Your aspirations are less lofty? Well, the principles still apply to you. I've never met a person who didn't want to be liked. Who didn't want to be listened to. Who didn't want to be appreciated for his or her individuality. And that individuality—that specialness that is you—is what we're aiming to reveal in your voice.

Therein lies the essence of my message to you: Your voice is your personal trademark. It serves as a calling card, presenting you and your ideas and your personality to a judgmental world, a world that will remember your voice image as vividly as your physical image, and perhaps more vividly.¹¹

Reminders for voice education

Music teachers have a unique potential for aiding proper, healthy vocal production and maintenance. Sensitivity toward the child's voice and his voice image can be a first step toward taking this responsibility. A second step requires curiosity to learn more about voices and to analyze what is asked of voices in our classroom.

These five suggestions could

10. Thurman, 23.

11. Morton Cooper, *Change Your Voice, Change Your Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1984), 51.

serve as reminders in beginning exercises for vocal awareness and education.

1. Substitute the phrase "sing with more energy" for "sing louder."
2. Get a vitality, flow, and freedom in the singing of a song before focusing on individual voices.
3. Incorporate simple movement and gestures to accompany the energy level given to the speaking and singing voice.
4. Avoid over-emphasizing the concepts of "high" and "low" as a means for instructing children to shift pitches or registers. Without students' personal awareness of the physical changes that occur, this can be detrimental to proper use of the vocal mechanism.
5. Remember that the experiences inherent in each of the six steps outlined earlier add up to something greater than the mere achievement of the last step, matching pitch.

Ultimately, the student's self is more important than musical skills he does or does not possess. And it is this self that, if properly cared for, can unleash new potential for vocal facility in speaking and singing.

Music teachers have a unique potential for aiding proper, healthy vocal production and maintenance. Sensitivity toward the child's voice and his voice image can be a first step toward taking this responsibility. A second step requires curiosity to learn more about voices and to analyze what is asked of voices in our classroom. This may seem a daunting task, yet it is not a foreboding one; even simple changes in ones' approach may result in great benefits to students.

Selected readings

Apfelstadt, Hilary. "Children's Vocal Range: Research Findings and Implications for Music Education." *Update* 1, 2, Fall 1982, 3-7.

Gould, A. Oren. "Developing Specialized Programs for Singing in the Elementary School." *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* 17, 1969, 9-22.

9. Atterbury, 44.