

# I CAN SING!

by Peggy D. Bennett  
University of Texas



"I can't sing." Three simple words. But the person who speaks them has been hexed. Either by himself or someone else, this person has been robbed of the joy of singing and of the abandon to sing alone or with a group. Why do many children, teenagers, and adults have this self-perception? Why have they become singing dropouts?

When I asked several young adults "why do you think you can't sing," their responses clearly fell into one of three categories:

- (a) they can't sing *like* some specific vocal model—"I know I don't sound like Whitney Houston;"
- (b) they had not been given feedback that they *could* sing—"I didn't know that I could sing. Thanks for telling me;" or
- (c) they had an experience (in school, at home or with friends) that embarrassed them about their singing voice—"I was told that I wasn't a good enough singer to be in the program."

I have even had a small number of students who couldn't sing because they did not know that singing felt any different from talking...so they just sang by talking the words. Is there any way to help these young adults who are stuck with the perceptions that they can't sing? Was there any way to prevent this perception from developing in the first place?

In our general music classes, how can we minimize the singing inhibitors and maximize the singing motivators for our students? For some of us, the price of making these changes may be a revolutionary adjustment in our attitudes toward singing *and* singers. Our entire society may need an overhaul of our concept of singing and of how we respond to those who sing.

In the January 1990 issue of *Music Educators Journal* Charles Elliott calls for a revival of the traditions of singing in America. "As a nation we no longer celebrate our cultural heritage in song. We are becoming a nation of nonsingers." (Elliott, 1990, p. 25). Although we could cite a number of reasons for the singing dropout rate, the more important activity for us is to seek ways to reverse this trend.

This article is intended to offer four specific perspectives

from which we can work to help each child feel motivated, confident, skillful, and knowledgeable about his or her voice. The sections are titled, Preserving Children's Motivation to Sing, Nurturing Children's Confidence to Sing, Developing Children's Skills for Singing, and Fostering Vocal Awareness. The approach offered here aims toward the paraphrased motto, "Singing for every child, every child a singer."

## PRESERVING CHILDREN'S MOTIVATION TO SING Enjoyment

Picture your students singing their favorite songs. Imagine their faces, their postures, and their voices as they sing. Can you see and hear the delight? What is it about these specific songs that motivates children to sing them? Is it the humorous words, the beautiful melody, the spirited rhythms, the related games, the program memories, the familiarity, or simply an appeal that is not easily apparent to us? What creates that inspired participation in which we all delight? One way to judge the motivation to sing that a song holds for children is to consider the likelihood that they will sing the song alone or within a group outside music class.

Think of the songs you enjoyed singing as a child. Are you teaching these gems to your students? As we ponder the songs that children like to sing, we must also look at the songs that we typically offer them in music class.

## Intrigue

What proportion of the songs we offer students are truly enjoyable for them to sing? Are the majority of students simply being compliant by singing the songs we teach them or are they really involved in spirited singing? Are the songs we present to students more like *exercises* than songs? Are songs from which we are building our music curriculum actually *songs* or are they chants and sayings that have been set to specific tones and rhythms for the purpose of learning to read music? "(Beginning in the mid-1960's) it became common practice for teachers to select songs entirely for their value in teaching predetermined 'concepts.' Singing for the sheer joy of singing was not highly valued." (Elliott, 1990, p. 25).

The simplicity of some songs that are used for the purpose of studying music notation may be counterproductive to intriguing children to *want* to sing them. Although the practice has grown to be more common in some areas than others, giving

(continued on page 10)

---

### About the author:

Peggy D. Bennett, PhD, is an Associate Professor and Head of Music Education at The University of Texas at Arlington.

# I CAN SING!

(continued from page 9)

two or three intervals and only simple, even rhythms may, at some point, work against their motivation to sing *and* their development of vocal facility.

Vocal facility develops from a child's opportunity to control his or her voice in a variety of ranges and placements. Therefore, it is variety and contrast in ranges, intervals, and rhythms that can offer children the opportunity to explore, refine, and control their own vocal production. Limiting children to walking may intend to make them expert walkers, but it impedes the other possibilities so necessary to their development *and* to the ultimate improvement of walking! So it is with singing.

Be cautious about following a method, a sequence, or a curriculum that over-emphasizes conceptual teaching to the detriment of singing. No published "method" includes *all* aspects and possibilities within the scope of elementary music education. Therefore, it is up to the teacher to use wisdom, sensitivity, and foresight in supplementing and adjusting lesson plans to include singing activities for all students in each music class.

If students, at the end of our time with them, know how to identify symbols, clap rhythms, name tonal patterns, recognize select composers, play classroom instruments, and distinguish meters but are not confident enough to sing alone or with others, have we missed a primary goal in music education? Each of these activities may be an important ingredient in a complete program of music education for children. None of these skills, however, can supplant the intimate personal and social satisfaction that is gained from the joy of singing alone and with others.

## Modelling

Is it possible for the teacher's own voice to dampen children's motivation to sing? Yes. Not normally is it the quality or the timbre of the teacher's voice that causes this effect; children seem very resilient to a variety of levels of expertise in singing. When a teacher's voice is full, however, with volume, power, and solo performance qualities, children may stop singing. Ironically, trained singers are often at a greater risk of this result than untrained singers.

Years of singing in a "recital" voice can present a dilemma for singing with children's voices. If a teacher's voice is overpowering and/or recital quality in a general music classroom, students' motivation to sing can be diminished in several ways. A student may stop singing because (a) he or she listens to the "talent" of the teacher's voice and cannot compete with the quality; (b) he or she listens to the power and volume of the teacher's voice and decides that it cannot be matched; or (c) he or she listens to the presence of the teacher's voice and realizes that the teacher is taking all responsibility for singing, so the children need not sing.

Vocal models for children are ideally light, clear voices that project breath energy, yet blend into the group sound of children's voices. This is not to say that those with lovely recital voices should never let children hear these skills. Rather, performing for children in a recital voice should be offered in small doses

with explanations about what the differences are between adults' and children's voices and trained and untrained voices.

## Sarcasm

Parents, teachers, and administrators deserve to be educated and informed about the importance of letting children sing. Too often the sarcastic humor used among families and friends about singing can be ultimately detrimental to a child's singing self-image. The old joke:

"What did you do with the money?"

"What money?"

"The money your parents gave you for voice lessons." is not so funny when the scars of the message last for decades and stunt a person's singing self. People must be made aware of the potentially disastrous effects of sarcastic or demeaning comments to singers about their voices.

Helping students avoid being embarrassed about their voices may be a constant challenge throughout elementary school. Not only might it involve enlisting the support and sensitivity of each classmate for another, it may also require informing and enlisting the cooperation of the entire school personnel. If we want to change or at least help shape the long-term perceptions that students have about their singing voices, engaging the support of parents, teachers and administrators to do this seems an important factor.

## NURTURING CHILDREN'S CONFIDENCE TO SING Teachers' Expectations

In order to identify our personal level of commitment for nurturing *each* child's singing self concept, we must ask ourselves the question: "Is there any occasion or situation in which I *want* someone to have the belief that he or she can't sing?" Deliberating this question is an especially important exercise in introspection. For any of us to make the choice to give a child (or any other person) the message that he or she cannot sing may be making a choice that will stunt that person's singing for a lifetime.

If we agree that we want to build confidence in singing, then, some of us must consider adjusting our attitudes about singing *and* singers. Imagine that all music teachers are placed on a continuum that graphs our degree of expectations for singers. At one extreme are those teachers who do not tolerate inaccuracy in singing. At the other end of the continuum are teachers who make no requests of students other than their participation in singing. Where would you normally place yourself on this imaginary continuum? As we consider this continuum, we realize that it is a balance somewhere near the middle that is ideal.

## Tolerance/Intolerance

Intolerance of inaccurate singing in a general music class can strip a person of his or her confidence and motivation to sing. Yet, acceptance of all singing as being "good" may give patronizingly false information about singing. So, what are we to do?

Perhaps the answer lies in seeing voices as we see people: being in varying phases of development rather than as being simply "good" or "bad." For some of us this retooling of our

perceptions of voices may take a major effort to accomplish, ironically because we *are* trained musicians.

As music teachers, we are trained to believe that singing is a musical performance and that we should aim for and expect only excellence in musical performance. In fact, our success as music teachers is, in part, judged by the performance excellence of our classes. We know that many children in our general music classes may not be *able* to offer us musical excellence in singing. We also know that over-emphasis on the "quality of performance" may diminish some students' "quality of participation." How can we avoid the trap of resenting or dismissing students for their lack of singing abilities?

### Voice=Person

A first step may be to separate the person and the voice. It can be so tempting for music teachers to equate a "good musician" with a "good person," and, unfortunately, the other extreme. If we can begin to think of children's voices as parts of their total being, like their legs, then we can more easily see and accept varying qualities and rates of development for their voices.

Few music teachers would think less of a child if his legs were not yet coordinated enough to skip. Yet, a child's learning to walk, skip, race, and dance is similar to his learning to sing. Success is a combination of experience, feedback, discovery, physical growth, and information. No amount of telling and testing can substitute for doing and growing. In fact, with both singing and moving, there are points at which the telling and testing can inhibit the doing and growing.

### Nurturing Participation

Imagine a toddler learning to walk. What would happen if, each time he tripped and fell or lost his balance and staggered, those around him would laugh and jeer showing indignance and irritation about his lack of ability. "You must not have listened to what I told you about balance, Willie!" "Weren't you paying attention when we explained about how high you must lift your feet?" "Obviously, you're just not trying hard enough." "No, Willie, that's just not good enough. You'll never be a walker."

The results of this attitude would be disastrous on children. Vocal (ear-throat) coordination, however, like motor coordination takes time *and* growth to develop. One certain way to stop development is to stop participation: in singing and in walking. We must support the person while we help him/her develop confidence and skills in singing.

### Good/Bad Voices

When we make a habit of complimenting voices with adjectives such as "good," "great," and "pretty," we can get trapped into a difficult dilemma. What do we say to and about the voices that are not "good" and "pretty?" The more we offer feedback that gives compliments on the "prettiness" of a voice, the more we believe and project the misconceived notion that voices are either "good" or "bad."

How should voices be judged? What constitutes a "good" voice? Is it possible for everyone to be a good singer? Does being a good singer mean that everyone *likes* my voice? Is it possible for everyone to agree on *who* is a good singer? What is it that makes someone a good singer? Can good voices sound

bad? Can bad voices sound good? Is it possible to enjoy listening to someone sing who is *not* a good singer? Is it possible *not* to enjoy listening to someone sing who is a good singer?

Why would we want a child to believe that he is either a good singer or a bad singer? Why would we want a child to believe that he is not and *never will be* a good singer? If we work from the perspective that singers are either good or bad, then we will project that to our students. And, when we do project this message to the children in our classes, we have no control over the extent to which they will personalize that message and use it to *hex* their participation in singing for a lifetime.

## DEVELOPING CHILDREN'S SKILLS FOR SINGING

### Voice Discovery

A crucial phase in developing vocal skills is the discovery of what voices can do, how voices can sound, and how voices can feel. The primary grades are not too young to begin helping children become aware of their voices.

Vocal awareness activities can help each student (a) experiment with quality and range possibilities for his voice; (b) describe how his voice feels and sounds as he experiments; (c) match quality and range of his voice to others in speaking and singing activities; (d) decide which labels best fit the sounds he and others are producing; and (e) produce specific pitches to match those given by other voices or instruments (Bennett, 1986). Apparent in these activities is an approach that is much broader than the sequence of: "Sing this." "No, that's too low. Sing higher." "You're still not getting it." The cycle just described is a more narrow focus on performance and correction. Vocal awareness aims for awareness, exploration, discovery, and identification. (See the article by Anna Langness in this issue for further details on building children's singing through voice education.)

### Matching Pitch

When a teacher approaches singing skills for children as if the first step *and* the ultimate step is matching pitch, vocal awareness is *not* necessarily a result. Vocal awareness may often be, in fact, a casualty. By using speaking voice activities to create a variety of sounds in a variety of ranges; by focusing children on the sounds that they and others can create with their voices; by offering children constructive feedback on what we hear their voices doing; by helping children know that they can control their own voices; and by building on the vocal frames of reference established by these activities, children's confidence and motivation to keep singing is nurtured through skill development in a non-threatening and non-testing environment.

### Feedback

Care and consciousness in selecting the comments we make to students about their voices is another facet of broadening our views of singers and singing. Constructive information rather than empty compliments is needed to give children confidence in what their voices can do. (Bennett, 1988; Bennett, 1989). The type of feedback endorsed here focuses not on the "talent"

(continued on page 12)

## I CAN SING!

(continued from page 11)

of the child or the voice, but on the skills being used or developed or the sound being heard or produced. Shifting teachers' and students' attention to listening and studying voices in this way can revolutionize the way voices are heard, used, and appreciated.

Sample questions that could be used for vocal awareness activities are:

What can your voice do?

Let me hear your voice try that.

Has your voice ever done that before?

Is that your normal voice?

What did you feel when you used that voice?

Was that a new place for your voice to sing?

What image did you get when you used (heard) that voice?

Was that your high (medium, low, loud, quiet, etc.) voice?

Are you sitting tall so your breath can support your voice?

Are you using breath energy to carry your voice?

Sample feedback statements for vocal participation could be:

That voice was a surprise.

It sounds like that was easy for your voice, was it?

You sure gave our voices a challenge in echoing you that time.

I have never heard your voice do that before.

It sounds as if your voice is not accustomed to singing there.

Although that feels to you like your medium voice, it sounds to me like your low voice. Could I hear your higher voice?

Your voice sounded so free and clear that time. Did you feel it?

That seems to be getting easier for your voice to do.

I can tell that your ears are letting your voice know what to do.

Your voice sounded just like Courtney's that time as you echoed her!

You are listening so carefully. That will help your voice know what to do.

### FOSTERING VOICE AWARENESS

Even before children enter school, they are at risk of developing vocal habits that could compromise their vocal health. When children enter school, however, recess seems to be the time at which most vocal misuse can occur. Children's extreme, constant screaming and yelling that has become a tradition at some school's recess time warrants our attention.

Children (and many adults) do not realize the potential short term and long term damage to their voices that constant screaming can cause. Music teachers must be the leaders in helping to educate children, their parents, and other teachers about the dangers of vocal misuse. The incidence of elementary age children who have chronic hoarseness is testimony to this need.

Help children realize that their voice is a part of them they must take care of, just like their eyes, hands, and teeth. Help them realize that neglecting proper care for their voice, like their body, may mean that they will not have full use of it in the future. Ask students to try an experiment: that they will agree to avoid screaming and yelling for a specified period of time (until next music class). Then have a class discussion to gather information and offer feedback. Were they successful in not yelling? Did they notice any changes in their voice?

In one class discussion following this experiment, we learned that children most frequently yelled because they were angry at a sibling or because they needed to get someone's attention. These revelations gave us the opportunity then to discuss some alternative, non-yelling ways to deal with these conditions that are so common in children's lives. Some children even noticed a change in their voices: How they could sing, how their voice sounded, and how sore their throat felt.

Enlist the cooperation of fellow faculty members in helping children to reduce the amount of strain they are placing on their voices from yelling. Be sure to let your physical education teacher know about this information so that his/her expectations for children's participation in group activities in the gymnasium might be adjusted. A call to a local otolaryngologist can give you support and information for talking to children and parents about the consequences of vocal misuse.

### Overuse

School programs seem to be the settings in which vocal overuse is most likely to occur in children. Audiences, other teachers, and principals sometimes believe that "louder is better." Children are told, "We can't hear you. Sing louder." Even when the music teacher tries very hard to protect students from oversinging, other teachers may unwittingly undermine these efforts by gesturing "we can't hear you!"

Again, the music teacher must take the lead in informing parents, teachers, and administrators about the ill-effects of vocal overuse in children. Children's voices are not capable of getting and sustaining "adult" quality and volume and this should not be the expectation. Let others know that your goals for children's voices are that they are full, clear, and light, but not strained. The same protective instincts we would have about a child's legs enduring a long distance race, we should have about expecting his/her voice to endure the prolonged strain of overuse in a school program setting.

### I CAN SING!

Singing is *most* often a "natural" act, and only *sometimes* an artistic performance. It may be true that students would be more apt to have a life long love affair with singing if we help them develop a singing self image of "I can sing!" before we try to turn them into expert singers. Selecting song materials that represent our singing heritage, that appeal to students' motivation to sing, that provide a common singing repertoire for all our students, and that foster the joy of singing can provide the musical setting for an "I can sing!" attitude. Monitoring the verbal and nonverbal messages that we give singers about their voices and themselves can nurture the classroom environment that produces "I can sing!" students. Let's keep students

singing!

Is it possible for us to keep students singing if we delight first in their participation, and then shape their skills for singing? Yes, it is. But only if we know *how* to shape those skills without compromising students' motivation and confidence in singing. Many of us feel inadequately trained to help children explore, discover, and experiment with their voices in a general music setting. Yet, if we avoid helping children develop skills on their primary musical instrument, their voice, are we not abdicating at least a portion of our role as their music teacher? An answer to this dilemma is to seek articles, courses, and workshops that will guide us to being the kind of "singing teacher" we want to be for our students.

No one in the community or the school has a greater power to give children the lifetime gift of singing than the general music teacher. Not a role to be taken lightly, we must do what we can: to rejuvenate a singing society by creating a singing school; to inform parents, teachers, and administrators about singing by helping them understand the vulnerability of children's voices; and to cultivate personal and professional attitudes about voices that nurture every child's self concept of "I can sing!"

#### References

- Bennett, P.D. (1986). A responsibility to young voices. *Music Educators Journal*, 73 (1), 33-38.
- Bennett, P.D. (1989). Is praise ALWAYS positive? *TMEC Connection*, 3(2), 12-13.
- Bennett, P.D. (1988). The perils and profits of praise. *Music Educators Journal*, 75(1), 22-24.
- Elliott, C.A. (1990). Singing in America: Revising a tradition. *Music Educators Journal*, 76(5), 24-26.

#### ON OUR COVER:

Photos by Randy Moore, Sally McBride, and Bob Robins



Spring, 1991

## SUMMER MUSIC STUDY IN SEATTLE at the UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON SCHOOL OF MUSIC

### Earn Your Master of Arts in Music Education in only Four Summers!

This program is created especially for the professional educator who wants to earn a graduate degree during Summer quarters only. Contact the Music Advising Office (206) 543-1239 for application materials and information.

#### Special Workshops and Institutes

Dalcroze Eurhythmics, June 30-July 5, June 30-July 19

Julia Schnebly-Black

Music in Early Childhood, July 8-12, Katalin Forrai

The Vocal Jazz Ensemble, July 15-19, Roger Treece

Multicultural Music Education, August 5-9,

Patricia Campbell and Barbara Lundquist

UW Summer Jazz Institute, July 8-12,

Tom Collier, Marc Seales, Roy Cummings, Michael Brockman

Percussion Education Institute, June 24-July 24,

Michael Crusoe and Tom Collier

K-12 Issues in Music Education, August 22-23, Neal Porter

Marching Band Techniques, July 12-July 13, Staff

Performance Techniques, June 24-July 24, Allen Vizzutti.

Special 1991 Guest Faculty: Katalin Forrai, ISME President,  
Allen Vizzutti, internationally renowned trumpet soloist,  
and Michael Crusoe, tympanist with the Seattle Symphony.

#### Full Session 4-week and 8-week Courses

Courses include Music Education, Instrumental Conducting, Percussion Techniques, MIDI Techniques, Jazz Improvisation, Band Repertoire, Seminars in Music and Socialization, Music Education in Secondary Schools. Additional studies are available in Music History, Theory, Ethnomusicology, and Applied Music.

For applications and information, contact:  
Office of Graduate and Undergraduate Advising  
School of Music, DN-10  
University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195  
Telephone (206) 543-1239

