

Philosophy of Teaching

I believe the role of a voice teacher is to coach the student toward maximum freedom and beauty in their singing. I approach teaching as an encouraging coach. The student must feel safe to grow and sing freely. My approach is meticulous – I never hesitate to give honest, critical feedback, but I always offer them a suggestion on how to improve. As soon as they show any sign of improvement, I recognize it. Step by step, the student begins eliminating bad habits and forming better ones. They can sense their own growth and are more accepting of critical feedback because they know it will lead to improvement. The student should never be shamed for making a bad sound but should be encouraged to keep exploring. By taking this approach to both technical and musical issues, student and teacher work together in a safe and exploratory environment toward ever-increasing musicianship.

I believe the voice teacher should meet the student where they are emotionally on any given day. Our emotions and psychology are so integrated into our singing, we cannot ignore their influence. I always take a moment at the start of a lesson to ask the student how they are doing. Their response, tone of voice, and body language all reveal their emotional state be it agitated, elated, light-hearted, or weighted. From this foundation of recognition and trust, we can begin the lesson as needed with a soothing hum or jump right in with an upbeat onset exercise.

For the vocalization portion of the lesson, I guide the student toward vocal ease and freedom through close attention to onset and resonance. Rather than mindlessly repeating exercises up and down the scale, we pause to correct an onset imbalance, adjust the resonators, or release a point of excess tension. Healthy, free, and beautiful singing must be encouraged and reinforced. The student will accept feedback from an honest and empathetic teacher, especially when it leads to a noticeable increase in ease and freedom.

As we move into the repertoire, we begin by laying a foundation of proper diction and free, vibrant tone. Singing is a form of communication, so it is important that the words be understandable, no matter the language. Freedom of the tone can be highly influence by the vowel, the pitch, or the duration of the note. Many singers begin timidly and tensely when a song is unfamiliar, and that tension can quickly become ingrained in their muscle memory. Therefore, I guide the student to sing slowly and mindfully, aiming for freedom and vibrancy, note by note, vowel by vowel.

As the song study progresses, I believe the student should have a clear understanding of what they are singing about to communicate the song expressively. For each song in a foreign language, I have students write out the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) and word-for-word translation of the poem. In the lesson, we discuss the poetry and the context of the character. I have found that a clear understanding of who the character is and what they want radically transforms not only the emotional, but the vocal performance of the song.

Finally, we weave healthy vocal technique and emotional understanding of the song together with the musical expression of the song. I draw the student's attention to the form of the song, its tonal structure, and the development of tension that leads to resolution. For example, while examining Robert Schumann's *Widmung* recently with a tenor, we recognized the common-tone modulation from Ab major to the tonally distant key of E major. We also noticed that Schumann exploits rhythmic dissonance – duplets in the voice over triplets in the piano – to bring the song to the highest state of tension before resolving rhythmically and tonally back into Ab major at “Du hebst me liebend über mich.” These discoveries give shape and direction to the musical line. No interpretation of a piece is complete without considering the musical elements the composer uses to convey the poetry.

Through the cyclical process of attention to technical, emotional, and musical elements of singing, the student, with their teacher's guidance, makes progress toward the ideal performance. One must remember that although the ideal is impossible to reach, its pursuit is a worthwhile endeavor. Many singers go astray striving for perfection which leads to tension. I believe the voice teacher should always be on guard for this tendency and should guide the student toward singing that is not perfect, but free, beautiful, and expressive. Through our honest communication, our concern for the student's wellbeing, our reflective approach to learning, and our own passion for the art of singing, voice teachers inspire students to sing with freedom, beauty and joy.