

# Teens and Pre-Teens: Guiding the Adolescent Voice

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**Over the years of adjudicating voice for the New York State School Music Association (NYS-SMA®), it's with both excitement and some trepidation that I see and hear a teenage (or younger) singer perform a challenging operatic aria or an equally demanding classical piece taken from the approved manual of musical selections.**

Many questions arise. Have they prepared? Are they in private voice? What should I expect from an adolescent whose voice is still in the midst of many changes? And when, I ask myself, did present-day children become so passionate not only about singing, but also about singing the classical repertoire in particular? Is it their goal to make the all-state festivals and to pursue a singing or teaching career? Or is it a one-time experience “just for fun?”

## **Potential stumbling blocks abound**

It is more desirable to see the performance experience as a collaborative effort between student and teacher, be it a public or private teacher, because the teacher has more knowledge of both appropriate vocal repertoire and the reasonable expectation and limita-

tions of the adolescent voice. (We're speaking of age ranges from 11 to 17.) Sadly, this is often not possible as our public schools have become severely restricted with budgetary cuts and resources, often eliminating or combining classes, programs and, more critical, eliminating teaching positions.

Thus ensues another stumbling block for the adolescent singer, as the teacher may not be able to provide a one-on-one coaching/preparation as a result of an already overextended workload and larger class sizes.

And one must also realize, of course, that there are those cases when it's not so much the student's desire to actually sing (or perform as an instrumentalist), but rather the desire of an overzealous parent (and in some instances teachers) who wish to propel the young child further.

This can be detrimental, especially depending on the

student's actual talent and ability, or, more disheartening, their total lack of interest and commitment. We as adjudicators and teachers have no doubt all heard a student who, sadly, had neither the talent, nor the preparation to perform the demanding higher-level, classically graded solos.

### My positive student experience

As for my own adolescence, my brother and I were lucky to have grown up where there was an opera company: Tri-Cities Opera in Binghamton, NY. We became hooked on opera and started to sing in the children's chorus. But my brother's passion for singing wasn't as strong as mine and I was begging my parents for voice lessons at age 11. This may all seem superfluous, but I now realize nothing has changed in terms of a young person's interest in both operatic or concert careers, only perhaps, even more opportunities (Several major U.S. opera companies are now offering apprentice programs for high school singers!) in an extremely competitive and evolving field.

On reflection, the only memories I have as a young boy taking private lessons are the thorough but gentle approach to singing. My teacher, also an opera singer, realized children in particular needn't be bombarded with aspects of a 'technique' that they may not be able to comprehend or to execute because of their young and still developing bodies, specifically the change in size of the larynx. My teacher's emphasis, rightfully so, was on the joy of singing, learning lots of songs, singing simple repetitive scales and developing a confident sight-reading ability. Vocal technique, if addressed at all, was of the most elementary, yet practical, advice for a soprano (treble) boy's voice at age 11.

In addition, my teacher luckily saw my potential and would actively seek out small performance opportunities, such as soloist at his church. Eventually, we prepared the role of Amahl in Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, which I sang with the local opera company. He even at one point pressed my parents to pursue an audition for me to sing with the Vienna Boys' Choir. My mother, most likely, didn't want to see her little boy so far away and this never came to fruition, something I still reflect upon from time to time.

### When technique counts

But aspects of my continuation in vocal study occurred only after the voice had changed or "dropped" and was in process of settling into a vocal register, that point at which addressing technique becomes critical. I had often heard the words and terms such as support, breath control, tone placement and color, phrasing, etc., but an

11-year-old isn't ready physically or intellectually to apply many of these principals.

Young voices (as in a pre-pubescent voice) need only have the simplest explanation of the technical process because they are already singing correctly based on their bodily growth and emotional and mental capabilities. Just as a baby breathes naturally with the rise and fall of the stomach, so does a young child until after puberty when, now a teen, the teacher, hopefully, recognizes that a deeper explanation of vocal technique is necessary. The goal being a continuance of singing healthy while growing the voice to consistently produce beautiful tonality.

Therefore, I have to pause and reflect on my own teaching: What is appropriate for a young singer? How much "technique" can one not only comprehend but also apply and when should a teacher either press the student with more discipline or take a much slower approach in developing and nurturing his talent? After all, we, as the teachers of voice and, in many cases also active performers, are the guardians of their instruments. We must be

vigilant to encourage but also to protect the adolescent voice from overuse and be cautious not to give a young singer too much, too soon.

Although I am basing this, of course, on my own experience with teaching young people and their level of natural talent and capability, it is our duty to continue to not only educate ourselves, but also to have a deeper understanding of the vocal folds.

Recognizing the degree of growth and change during and after puberty and beyond is an important component. For as the change of the larynx and its growth differs between the male and female voice, there is also maturation occurring in the intellectual and emotional areas at the same time.

### Understanding the voice

Assistant Professor of Music at Georgia State University Patrick K. Freer is astute to point out that during the middle school years in particular, boys and girls will see gradual vocal changes, specifically that boys will develop a lower pitch range and girls experience a richer and fuller vocal timbre. Although his emphasis is on the choral warm-up process, these observations are critical for both public school and private vocal instructors. "Those who teach young adolescent singers need to be familiar with research-based resources about the adolescent voice so they can incorporate this information in their instruction."

Therefore, I would like to offer some of my own insights to teachers working with the adolescent voice that have helped me as I continue to learn over the years. When I am working with a young voice (pre-teen to about

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age 14), my first concern is the students' overall health and their level of comfort as they sing. Usually, a few gentle probing questions can gather valuable information, as well as relax the student. An instructor should ask whether students are getting adequate sleep, what their exercise and dietary habits are, have they recently been ill and how much singing might they have already done that day.

And then, I like to hear the student sing a little from easy scale patterns and exercises I have developed. This gives the teacher immediate feedback as to the quality and ease of the student's singing.

My personal preference is to work out of the book of vocal exercises/songs by Nicolo Vaccai, *Practical Method of Italian Singing*. Every student should be exposed to language, and for singers Italian is perhaps the most voice friendly and musical of the Romance languages: its open vowels allow for more freedom of tone and a better sense of the open throat, absent of constraint.

In addition, Vaccai's simple melodies (exercises) start out very elementary (ascending and descending scales) and offer a beginner the opportunity to be exposed to a basic, yet beautiful, world of language and melody. Each exercise (song) is designed to prepare the singer for the next, slightly more complex exercise, and Maestro Vaccai (b. 1790) so clearly explains why one should start vocal training in the Italian language because "...of the language itself, where the pure and sonorous tone of its many vowel sounds will assist the singer in acquiring a fine voice production and a clear and distinct enunciation in any language..."

Furthermore, it's always prudent to ask the student, "How did that feel?" Are you experiencing any discomfort or strain in the exercise?" "How difficult was that for you?" Such evaluations throughout a lesson are needed so as not to injure the young vocal folds.

I subscribe to a series of exercises that lays the groundwork that will serve to grow the voice in a healthy and comfortable way of singing with less effort in production. Any discomfort and especially excessive effort or worse – pain – with an exercise must be stopped and evaluated immediately to avoid trauma.

### **Protecting the young voice**

Moreover, Distinguished Professor of Speech Science and Voice Ingo R. Titze asks some critical questions. "How do we measure vocal ability and how do we

measure vocal effort?" His most probing concern remains "...not knowing how much voice rest is needed for recovery." Clearly, young voices in particular cannot be pushed and extensive choral rehearsals too may prove strenuous. Certainly any hoarseness or unusual cracking (breaking) of a tone must alert a teacher to immediately stop the lesson in order to avoid any further vocal fatigue and possible undue strain. Therefore, with adolescent singers, in particular pre-pubescent ones, I subscribe to the idea that a lesson should be limited to no longer than 30 minutes.

For instance, when American soprano Beverly Sills started formal vocal training at age seven (!), her teacher, the esteemed Estelle Liebling, agreed to teach Sills but only one day a week for fifteen minutes. Sills recalled that Liebling knew, "that was enough for my still fragile, young voice."

For the famous Wagnerian soprano Helen Traubel, her training started at age 13 for only a one half-hour lesson. And then it consisted of "scales and more scales, starting with a half-hour each day and increasing steadily." Eventually, she was rewarded with a song to prepare - wise vigilance on the part of these teachers.

In addition, this variance in age serves as a reminder that each student, of course, has different gifts and capabilities. Discernment on the part of the teacher is vital. The magnificent German baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, who excelled in the German lieder (and of course, opera), didn't start formal vocal training until age 16, by which time he was already a fine musician. Exceptions exist of course, such as American contralto Marian Anderson who recalled at age 13, "I had no thought about technique or style ... I did not need them."

In conclusion, the realization that every voice is different in its capabilities and maturation process is paramount. Teachers of voice, public school and private studio, and vocal adjudicators, must take all of this into account when either working with adolescents or listening and evaluating them with fairness, which now envelops a deeper understanding, though not trepidation.

As singer and director/conductor Kevin D. Skelton so eloquently observes, "Most importantly, singing teachers must accept that children have a profound capacity for singing artistically with outstanding technique, and such potential can be realized safely and effectively."

## **Key Points**

- **Young singers' motivations are varied.**
- **Focus on instilling the joy of singing in the early years.**
- **Let the voice matures, then focus on technique.**
- **Simple exercises reveal – and teach – much.**
- **Safeguarding the young voice from overuse is essential.**



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