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## Vocal Pedagogy and Appropriate Repertoire for Pre-Adolescent Children



### Introduction

For a child, much as it should be for an adult, to sing is to turn interests, experiences, and feelings into a personal musical expression. Children have been known to sing spontaneously, alone or together, reflecting the activities of daily living. Music teachers have long agreed that all children can, and should, learn to sing. Lowell Mason (1792-1872), having published his “Singing School” concepts of music education, is thought to be the father of this idea.<sup>1</sup> There are still questions that remain open for discussion in the area of vocal pedagogy for young singers. Is it appropriate to privately train young voices before they have fully matured? If private instruction is appropriate, at what age should voice lessons begin for an interested child? After these questions are answered, it is crucial for the private voice teacher to find an approach that benefits the child and to develop criteria for choosing appropriate repertoire for the young singer. Upon exploration of theories and data on the ages and vocal development of children, the musical abilities of children, the training of the child voice, voice ranges of children, and repertoire selection for the child soloist, a voice teacher can be well-informed to make decisions about private voice lessons for pre-adolescent children.

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<sup>1</sup> Phillips, Kenneth, Teaching Kids to Sing, New York: Schirmer Books, 1992: 6.

## Age and Vocal Development

The first factors that should be considered when making a decision about private voice training are the age and the vocal development of the student. Jean Westerman Gregg, in the January/February 2000 issue of Journal of Singing, gives a detailed overview of the development of the vocal anatomy in response to the question “How can a voice teacher know what any particular set of young vocal folds is capable of, as far as strength of tone and appropriate repertoire concerned?”<sup>2</sup> As early as infancy, as children begin to develop their vocal capabilities, they are making sounds. However, while the airway must function well at birth, the larynx and its supporting structures are not mature enough to function as a speaking or singing instrument. Gregg’s compiled information about the vocal anatomy of a singer supports the reasoning behind most professional performers not achieving prominence before their mid- to late-thirties. Training of the vocal mechanism takes this amount of time based on the length of time it takes for maturation of the vocal structures. Another source, Barbara Doscher, concludes that “laryngeal development is not complete until the late 20s or early 30s.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, training the voice at any point between birth and full maturation calls for the teachers’ awareness of the vocal maturity of each of their students. They should also not be in a rush to send them beyond what their physical structures are capable of at the time of study.

The idea of not rushing maturity with a child singer is one that is pertinent in the area of children’s vocal pedagogy. Robert Edwin, in the November/December 1999

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<sup>2</sup> Gregg, Jean Westerman, “Voice Teaching and Laryngeal Maturation,” Journal of Singing 56 (3), 2000: 67.

<sup>3</sup> Doscher, Barbara, The Functional Unity of the Singing Voice, London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1994: 241.

Journal of Singing, wrote an interesting article addressing this issue as it applies to the new population of young singing stars.<sup>4</sup> Britney Spears, LeAnn Rimes, and the newly introduced eight-year-old country star Billy Gillman are a few examples of this trend. In particular, Edwin focuses on Charlotte Church and her classical album “Voice of an Angel,” recorded when Charlotte was only twelve. Edwin’s concern is that misconceptions about proper singing can be formed just as much through this classical album as they have been formed by listening to and observing pop singers. In her televised concerts it becomes obvious that Charlotte has a jaw wobble that matches the speed of her vibrato. Edwin mentions how Charlotte’s vocal tutor, Louise Ryan, should “be called into question about some of Charlotte’s inefficient and potentially damaging vocal techniques.”<sup>5</sup> He fears that young singers will imitate her tensions and wobbles because she is famous and successful. Edwin is an advocate for teaching children who want to sing, but stands behind his statement, “All singers, and especially young singers, need to know and respect their unique vocal potential and work to develop it slowly and safely.”<sup>6</sup>

In addition to keeping in mind the outside forces that may influence a young singer as they develop, the voice teacher must also be aware of how the child’s physical growth affects vocal anatomy and production. The vocal development of pre-adolescent children is an intriguing process to map out. Patricia Shehan Campbell and Carol Scott-Kassner, authors of Music in Childhood, compiled a table listing the ages and the vocal developmental activities of children. The developmental activities listed in this chart can give the private voice teacher an excellent idea of when training should begin for an

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<sup>4</sup> Edwin, Robert, “Voice of an Angel,” Journal of Singing 56 (2), 1999: 49-51.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

interested child. It can also give clues to help the teacher decide what repertoire is most appropriate for the child.

Figure 1: "Children's Vocal Development," *Music in Childhood*, page 128.<sup>7</sup>

<i>Age</i>	<i>Developmental Activity</i>
Less than one	Vocalizes (babbling) vowels and consonants
Age one/two	Babbles in irregular rhythmic patterns Imitates the contour of songs' melodic phrases, but not discrete pitches
Two	Babbles in extended melodic phrases Babbles in small intervals of seconds, thirds Imitates occasional discrete pitches of songs
Three	Invents "spontaneous songs" with discrete pitches and recurring rhythmic and melodic patterns Reproduces nursery rhymes and childhood chants
Four/five (Kindergarten)	Discovers differences between speaking and singing voices Shifts song qualities from light and airy to the "playground yell" for lively songs Sings spontaneous songs spanning two octaves Sings in tune within range of five pitches, d-a
Six/seven (Grade one)	Sings in tune in range of d-b Can begin to develop head voice, with guidance Begins to have expressive control of voice.
Seven/eight (Grade two)	Sings in tune in range of octave, about C-c' or d-d', with smaller tessitura
Eight/nine (Grade three)	Sings in tune in range of B <sub>1</sub> -e', with smaller tessitura Can perform fundamental harmony songs such as melody over vocal ostinato or sustained pitch
Nine/ten (Grade four)	Sings in tune range of A to e', with smaller tessitura Sings with increasing resonance (grades four, five, and six) May experience first vocal change (boys, beginning age ten) Can perform canons, rounds, descants, countermelodies Can sing with appropriate phrasing, with guidance
Ten/eleven (Grade five)	Sings in tune range of A <sub>1</sub> to f', with C-c' octave tessitura Is increasingly selective of song repertoire Prefers songs in middle range Prefers songs without sentimental or babyish texts Can perform two-part songs
Eleven/twelve (Grade six)	Sings in tune range of G to g', with C-c' octave tessitura Can perform three-part songs

c = middle c; c' = one octave higher; and C = one octave lower than middle C.

<sup>7</sup> Campbell, Patricia Shehan and Carol Scott-Kassner, *Music in Childhood*, New York: Schirmer Books, 1995: 128.

The chart shows that between the ages of six and twelve the child begins to have control over the voice and may physically be ready for vocal training. There are, however, many other factors to address before enrolling a young child in private voice lessons.

### **Musical Abilities of Children**

Unfortunately, there are children grow into adults who may never learn to sing accurately or with any measure of confidence. This adult may equate the inability to sing with a lack of musical ability in general. A child's perceived musical abilities, as well as the child's attitude towards singing, should greatly influence the teacher's decision on how early to start incorporating vocal technique into the child's music education. There are many theories that have been developed that attempt to categorize the musical abilities of children. Most theories stem from the idea that "all children with normal vocal and auditory physiology can learn to sing."<sup>8</sup>

Graham Welch hypothesized a "developmental continuum of singing ability," which is characterized by five stages from out-of-tune to in-tune singing. Kenneth Phillips describes these stages in full detail in Teaching Kids to Sing.<sup>9</sup> The characteristics of the "Stage 1" singer include the words being the initial center of interest rather than the melody, as well as little variation of sung pitch. "Stage 5," at the end of the continuum calls for a demonstration of high-level pitch-matching ability and a more expanded use of range. These stages are meant to "suggest that children's singing should be thought of as a developmental process and that teaching strategies should account for these stages."<sup>10</sup> Welch also concludes, "The teacher's role involves a recognition of the

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<sup>8</sup> Irwin, Phyllis and Joy Nelson, The Teacher, the Child, and Music, Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1986: 19.

<sup>9</sup> Phillips, Kenneth, Teaching Kids to Sing, New York: Schirmer Books, 1992: 72.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 73.

complexity of this singing development. A child who shows evidence of being at one of the less skilled stages should be regarded as a client for development, rather than necessarily receiving an irretrievable lack of ability in music.”<sup>11</sup>

Another researcher, J. Rutowski, created The Singing Voice Development Measure (1990) for studying the responses of kindergarten children. The five categories proposed, also explained in Phillip’s book, are similar to Welch’s. These five categories label students are “pre-singers,” “speaking-range singers,” “uncertain singers,” “initial range singers,” and “singers.”<sup>12</sup> “Pre-singers” include children who do not sustain tones and whose singing resembles chanting in the speaking voice range. “Speaking-range singers” are singers who exhibit some sensitivity to pitch but remain within the singing voice range. “Uncertain singers” are those who waver between a speaking-voice range and a singing-voice range. The “initial-range singers” are children who have use of the singing voice up to the register lift (usually to an a<sup>1</sup>). “Singers” are children that are able to sing over the register lift and above and have full use of the singing voice.

Children in the primary grades can fall into any of the five stages given by Welch and Rutowski. After the primary grades, the “third grade appears to be a pivotal year in the life of children.”<sup>13</sup> During this time period, and possibly before, children who once participated in singing with enthusiasm become self-conscious and resist participation. At this time teachers need to be aware that these attitudes can harden and affect the intermediate years of the child’s music education. Teachers should also do everything possible to assure that there is no gender bias in singing and that every child can learn how to sing. In the fourth grade, students who have experienced good vocal production

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<sup>11</sup> Qtd. in Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

will begin to demonstrate fine children's singing. According to Phillips, "vocal development and beauty peaks in the child's voice in the fifth, sixth, and seventh grades." During these grades a developing vocal technique should be evidenced in attention to posture, breath management, pitch accuracy, resonance, and diction, and greater attention to the meaning and mood of the song texts. At this age, which leads up to puberty and the adolescent stage, children should be aware of the changes that will take place psychologically as well as physically, including a voice change in both male and female voices.

### Training of the Child's Voice

The prevailing attitude among some music educators is that the training of the child voice should be delayed until the vocal folds have completely matured, or have at least adjusted to the physical changes related to puberty. Kenneth Phillips addresses this idea, stating that "their reason for delaying is the fear that vocalises and vocal techniques may damage a young voice."<sup>14</sup> Contrary to this myth that singing lessons should begin in or after adolescence is the assertion that "vocal technique can be taught from the earliest songs by the knowledgeable teacher."<sup>15</sup> Medical experts Robert Sataloff and Joseph Spiegel (1989) are mentioned in Phillip's book as supporting the argument that "it is possible and proper to train young voices to sing."<sup>16</sup> Although vocal abuse is cautioned against, an approach based on the gradual development of vocal musculature and control is recommended for young singers. In a carefully monitored program of voice development, with close attention being paid to endurance (for a child cannot be expected

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<sup>14</sup> Phillips, Kenneth, Teaching Kids to Sing, New York: Schirmer Books, 1992: 4.

<sup>15</sup> Campbell, Patricia Shehan and Carol Scott-Kassner, Music in Childhood, New York: Schirmer Books, 1995: 127.

<sup>16</sup> Phillips, Kenneth, Teaching Kids to Sing, New York: Schirmer Books, 1992: 4. (Sataloff and Spiegel published an article in *The NATS Journal*, 45 (3), 1989, entitled "The Young Voice.")

to endure long practice sessions or demanding vocal exercises), it is believed that child and adolescent voices can benefit from training.

The natural development of the voice that takes place between preschool and the elementary grades (discussed previously) is a development that Campbell and Scott-Kassner, authors of Music in Childhood, believe can be greatly enhanced through training.<sup>17</sup> Although these authors suggest training, they make a point to stress that “lessons may best be reserved for the later years of adolescence and adulthood when vocal development is complete.”<sup>18</sup> The training suggested for younger singers involves a quickening of the pace of development through songs, vocal games, and drills, as well as daily or twice-weekly “group sings.” Kenneth Phillips asserts, “The first grade is the time to begin instruction in vocal technique. Some attention to the parameters of posture and breathing, phonation, tone production, diction, and expression are quite possible at this age.”<sup>19</sup> This statement coincides with Figure 1, the “Children’s Vocal Development” chart from Music in Childhood shown on page 4. In the table, the first grade developmental activities include developing the head voice with guidance. Phillips also brings up the point that the age of eight is the time during which the lungs have developed fully, so the child is more likely to be able to sustain the upper voice.<sup>20</sup> He believes that without this proper instruction in the process of singing, children develop bad habits that are ingrained for life.

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<sup>17</sup> Campbell, Patricia Shehan and Carol Scott-Kassner, Music in Childhood, New York: Schirmer Books, 1995: 131.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Phillips, Kenneth, Teaching Kids to Sing, New York: Schirmer Books, 1992: 72.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 17.

Phyllis Irwin and Joy Nelson, in the book entitled The Teacher, the Child, and Music, address the behavioral characteristics of children in music.<sup>21</sup> The ages described span from five to twelve. At the age of seven, the interested child is said to express strong desires to take private music lessons. At the ages of nine and ten, however, according to this outline, most children may find solo-oriented activities to be awkward or embarrassing. This behavioral study brings up an excellent point: although the child may be physically ready for vocal training, psychological factors may interfere with the private voice student's progress.

### Children's Voice Ranges

Being aware of a child's expected voice range is crucial to vocal pedagogy of the young singer. A thorough dissertation written by Pamela Wurgler, entitled "A Perceptual Study of Vocal Registers in the Singing Voices of Children," is an excellent source for comparing researchers' theories on children's voice ranges and registers. Wurgler's research supports the idea that "the child voice is closer in anatomical size and vocal production to the adult female voice than it is to the adult male."<sup>22</sup> In comparison to the female voice, the child's voice is thought to have three different registers within its range: chest, middle, and head. Given this knowledge, finding the comfortable range and tessitura of a child's voice has been a difficult task for researchers. "The vocal range and/or tessitura of young singers has probably been the focus of more research than any other single vocal concept for children."<sup>23</sup> Kenneth Phillips, and the authors of Music in Childhood agree on the same pitches for the ranges and tessituras for children's voices,

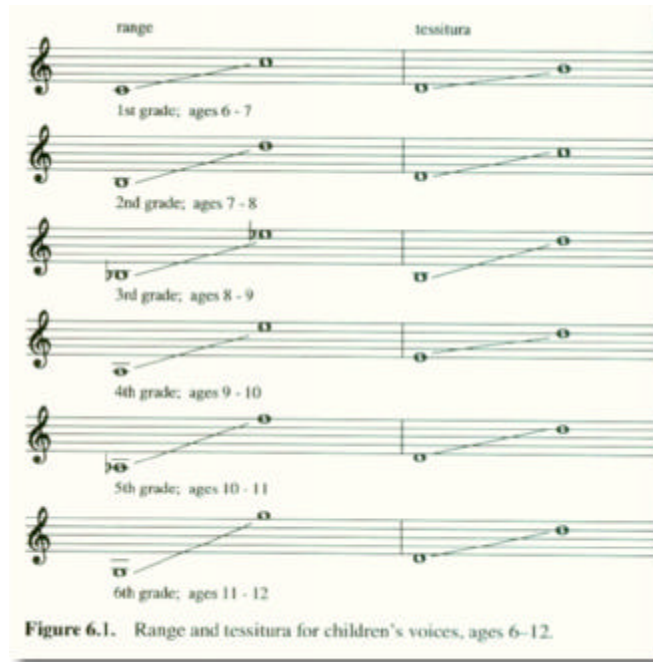
<sup>21</sup> Campbell, Patricia Shehan and Carol Scott-Kassner, Music in Childhood, New York: Schirmer Books, 1995: 8-11.

<sup>22</sup> Wurgler, Pamela S., "A Perceptual Study of Vocal Registers in the Singing Voices of Children," diss., The Ohio State University, 1990: 46.

<sup>23</sup> Qtd. in: Phillips, Kenneth, Teaching Kids to Sing, New York: Schirmer Books, 1992: 56.

ages six to twelve, with a discrepancy of a half-step in the tessituras. Music in Childhood's figure on ranges and tessituras can be a helpful aid for the private voice teacher when choosing repertoire.

Figure 2: "Range and tessitura for children's voices, ages 6-12," Music in Childhood, page 130.<sup>24</sup>



## Repertoire Selection

After the decision has been made to enroll a child in private lessons, the voice teacher should develop a list of criteria for choosing appropriate repertoire for the student. The teacher should first check to see if the song is age-appropriate. The range and the tessitura should be checked for agreement with the expected ranges of the child at that age. The text should be evaluated as well. The child should be interested in the subject matter. No offensive language should be found in the text, intentional or unintentional. The text should be neither "babyish" nor too "grown-up." If in a foreign language, the diction should be taught to the child. The style of the song should also be

<sup>24</sup> Campbell, Patricia Shehan and Carol Scott-Kassner, Music in Childhood, New York: Schirmer Books, 1995: 130.

appropriate for children. The melody and rhythms should not be too difficult, nor should they be too easy. The musical content should challenge the child and relate to the theory they are being taught in the music class. It is helpful to record the accompaniments of the songs for the child to practice with, and it is imperative that the child learn proper practice techniques.

There are books with supplementary accompaniment CDs and tapes that can aid the private voice teacher in lessons. Some examples of this type of repertoire collection include Solos for Kids, Church Solos for Kids, Solos from Musicals for Kids, Kids' Broadway Songbook, Popular Solos for Young Singers, The Basics of Singing, and Foundations in Singing. The last two selections are a collection of songs from different genres, including folk songs, musical theater, and art songs. Other collections, which can be explored on the Internet before they are purchased, include Children's Fun Songs, Mother Goose Nursery Rhymes and Lullabies, Patriotic/Folk/Traditional Songs, and Holiday Sings for Children. "Amanda's Fun House of Melodies," only one of such websites on the Internet, allows the teacher to download and listen to various titles.<sup>25</sup> The songs chosen need to reflect the goals of instruction and should meet the criteria set by the voice teacher.

## Conclusion

The ages and the vocal development of children, the musical abilities of children, the training of the child voice, voice ranges of children, and repertoire selection for the child soloist are all important aspects of pedagogy for the young singer. Pre-adolescence is a delicate time of growth for any child. This time is not only a period for physical

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<sup>25</sup> The address for this website is [www.geocities.com/EnchantedForest/Glade/7438/](http://www.geocities.com/EnchantedForest/Glade/7438/).

growth, but also mental and musical growth. Data has shown that the child may be physically ready for private voice training by the age of seven. Upon accounting for the psychological changes taking place during this time, the argument for “group singing” is well-supported. Private lessons are best reserved until the fifth or sixth grade, when the child has had time to mature and develop. Preparations can then be made for adolescence, and adolescent issues can be addressed before the changes happen. Many parents are eager to enroll their children in voice lessons, some of them possibly hoping for their child to be a new singing sensation. Because physiology is involved in the process of singing, these desires must be kept in check, for rushing maturity may only prove to be damaging to the child’s voice.

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