

Teaching singing to children and young adults

Second Edition – a look inside the book

Jenevora Williams

Illustrations: Harry Venning

Graphic designs: Milton Mermikides

Following on from the enormous popularity of the first edition of *Teaching Singing to Children and Young Adults*, this exciting new edition provides yet more practically relevant information for everyone working with children's voices.

Completely new content includes much more up-to-date material on how to deliver information and exercises to the student. The principles of Motor Learning skills are explained, relating the latest research from sport science to structuring lessons and vocal exercises. Learning new skills is not purely about repetition, the style and variety of information delivery from the teacher is crucial. The nature and frequency of the feedback is also much better understood and can be planned and given in a more considered manner.

The nature of creativity is explored in the light of recent research in psychology and learning. The creative child may appear to be either fidgety or inattentive. What is going on under the surface may be very different from the impression given by the child. Many more schools now require children to be taught in groups, if this is managed in an imaginative way it can actually be a far more effective way of learning. The tools for this are clearly explained.

There are, of course, numerous more exercises with explanations, including detailed information about semi-occluded vocal tract work.

All of this exciting new knowledge is illustrated with even more delightful cartoons from Harry Venning along with a series of new anatomical illustrations from Harvey Taylor.

Reviews of the first edition

Thank you to whoever recommended this book! I am reading avidly and making notes as I go along! It's affirming what I already teach – plus giving me some really excellent supporting physiological examples as well as imagery. Thank you! Facebook user

Teaching Singing to Children and Young Adults is an exciting new book which I am certain will become a really useful and comprehensive reference guide for all those wishing to lead singing. Howard Goodall CBE, Composer and Broadcaster

'The indispensable bible for the many singing teachers who work with 'children and young adults'... it is difficult to over-emphasise the significance which I think this book has for the future of our young singers. The combination of long and thoughtful practical experience with an enquiring mind and formidable research knowledge has resulted in a remarkable treatise on the subject.' Singing: Voice of the Association of Teachers of Singing

'You have done something spectacularly good and I heartily congratulate you. Not only do you write such palpable sense throughout, but your style is eminently readable, and clear as crystal.' Singing Teacher, Royal College of Music, London

'What a great book! So much of this text resonates with all the other areas of my musical life, and I find myself almost exclaiming out loud with agreement. The book is so beautifully and clearly written, and I love the illustrations; it is, in essence, invaluable.' Music Teacher

'I can't believe I've survived this long without it, it should be compulsory for every Cathedral organist in the land!' Director of Music, Magdalen College, Oxford

'This book is a must have for any teacher working with an adolescent voice. Dr Jenevora is a leading expert in this field and is constantly researching. I believe she has a second book in the making too. I have recently completed the first year of a Master's degree where she is one of the teachers on the course. I cannot recommend this book enough.' Sophie (Amazon reviewer)

'A well-conceived, well-written book, perfect for all involved with training young voices. Whether working in a classroom, choir or private teaching studio, there will be sections of this book which will re-enforce teachers' own ideas about vocal training, while at the same time, Jenevora Williams manages to de-bunk the many myths that have evolved over time. The comparison of voices at different ages, along with all the references to the wealth of research is so valuable. The technical/physiological sections are clear and incredibly well-explained, and the exercises have very welldefined outcomes.... My colleagues at school have all found the book very informative, particularly when dealing with changing voices in both boys and girls. I would heartily recommend the book to anyone involved in working with young voices at any level.' Oliver Neal Parker, Head of Singing, Uppingham School, Rutland (Amazon reviewer)

'It is approachable yet full of all the important stuff anyone who is teaching young singers needs to know. It contains hints and tips that can be incorporated into lessons and practice schedules and the emphasis is on healthy voice production. Dr Jenevora Williams draws on her work, and that of others to produce an authoritative book that is never dry, or stuffy, and is as easy to read for novice teachers as it is for seasoned

professionals. I am proud to have it on my work bookshelf and apply the techniques to older voices too.'
Joanna (Amazon reviewer)

'A handbook intended for all those engaged in teaching singing or drama to children and young adults. Also benefits those involved in vocal therapy and training. Excellent chapters on children with special needs and on the development of the "changing voice" in young boys which it is important to handle sensitively and constructively. Any practitioner will find this indispensable. J. G. Phipps (Amazon reviewer)

'I can't recommend this book too highly and would just echo all the positive remarks other reviewers have made. The book is of course terrific for guiding those working with the young voice in terms of e.g. physiology, approaching technique and lesson planning. And, as another reader has found, the book offers a really simple and approachable overview of teaching singers of any age. I write as someone new to teaching singing and found the book immeasurably helpful in knowing where to start.' GA (Amazon reviewer)

'Finally!! An accessible book on teaching singing. In particular, one that addresses teaching children and young adults. Williams has produced a thorough coverage on every aspect of the subject in expert detail, yet in a way that makes it understandable and applicable. This will be my teaching Bible from now on!'
Rebecca (Amazon reviewer)

About the author

This book has arisen out of my personal fascination with people: how their voices work, how to get them to work at their optimum, why they sometimes don't work as well as they could, how they develop throughout the lifespan and how the personality of the singer is at the core of the whole process. I was a professional solo singer for many years, working in opera, oratorio and recitals. I had always taught alongside performing and gradually my interest in teaching overtook that of performing. After ten years of a busy touring performance schedule, I shifted the balance towards teaching and have found it endlessly fascinating and rewarding.

As a singing teacher, I work with people of all ages and abilities. I teach professional adult singers, pupils who are training to be professionals and amateur singers. I teach classical, musical theatre and pop. As well as dealing with healthy voices, I do specific rehabilitation work with singers from the hospital voice clinic: these individuals come under all of the categories mentioned above. I also teach children and have done so for over twenty years. I have been extremely fortunate to have taught in a variety of excellent institutions: music conservatoires, specialist music schools, theatre schools, cathedral choir schools, state schools and independent schools. Working with such a diverse group of pupils has been a real privilege and has given me many opportunities to think about the teaching

process. In addition to practical teaching work I have been involved in voice research. This means working with laryngologists, acousticians, electrical engineers, anatomists, speech therapists, statisticians and educational theorists, all of them experts in their fields and all fascinated by voices.

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Prelude

Questioning the assumptions

“It is a mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.”

Aristotle

Humans are resourceful and curious. When presented with evidence we will make assumptions about cause and effect. If this evidence is limited, the assumptions may be flawed. Think of the Black Death travelling from China, through Europe and into Britain in the fourteenth century. Initially it was believed that this was due to the conjunction of three planets in 1345, causing ‘great pestilence in the air’. Many years later, a link between the presence of rats and the disease was established, suggesting that rats were responsible. Later, further evidence linked the disease to the fleas that lived on the rats. Recent research has concluded that the bacterium *Yersinia pestis* was present in the fleas, which were carried by the rats. The recent researchers are no more intelligent than the astronomers of the fourteenth century; they merely have more evidence on which to base their conclusions.

The voice is inside the body; we can’t see much of what is happening, so teachers have tended to base their methods on how it feels. Teaching anyone to sing has always been a subjective process: intelligent and curious teachers have devised methods and theories founded on their experience. This approach has, of course, produced fantastic singers, despite the limited evidence-base. Perhaps a re-evaluation of singing pedagogy, with the advantage of more information, would help some of the singers who develop problems with their voices, or those who are just less able than others. Nowadays teachers can’t use ignorance as an excuse, we can draw on a huge range of knowledge. With modern techniques of voice analysis and internal observation we can begin to understand more about how we sing. The sciences of X-rays, MRI scanning, spectral and waveform analysis,

electroglottograms and laryngoscopy have contributed to our knowledge of vocal function. Scientific evidence can illuminate much of our accepted teaching practice, so that we are able to separate out the more useful and effective traditional voice training methods. Of course, this is all work in progress. Research and the pursuit of knowledge and understanding have not stopped yet, and never will do. There is still much that we don't know about voices and how they work. Our current understanding is merely based on the evidence we have here and now.

This book seeks to question every aspect of children's voices and methods of teaching singing that we may have assumed to be correct. If they can stand up to scrutiny in the light of the most recent evidence, then they are the best we can have for the moment.

There are many commonly held beliefs that may not withstand this reassessment. Here are some examples of widely accepted ideas that are being challenged.

'Babies can cry for hours and their voices don't get tired – surely we could learn from them?'

Babies have a completely different vocal set-up from children and adults. Their needs are specific to them and so the function of the voice isn't really comparable. Their prime concern for survival is to make noise to attract attention (short, loud, but not necessarily varied) and to feed efficiently (large quantities in little time); their vocal set-up fulfils this need excellently. Children and adults have developed the ability to form a huge variety of vocal sounds, enabling speech. Sustained speech (and singing) is helped by having larger lungs; these are needed for activities such as running. Infants have smaller lungs, and a larynx with different proportions, sitting higher in the throat. Young children have a vocal system that is part way between the infant and the adult model. Understanding this can help us to see why children's voices are not like mini-adult voices.

'Sing from your diaphragm'

The diaphragm can neither be seen or felt either internally or externally. Furthermore, it is working when we inhale, not when we make sound. This implies that any mention of the diaphragm is of little use for singing, the muscles we are consciously using for breathing are mostly abdominal ones.

'Warming up should start with stretching exercises'

Sports science suggests that it can be damaging to stretch cold muscles. For the singer, stretching includes singing sustained high notes as well as overall body stretches. An effective warm-up needs to work the body gently in order to increase blood flow to the muscles; it also raises the muscle temperature, enabling better metabolic function. Overall body movements such as jogging or dancing are the best way to prepare muscles for action; this can be followed by gentle breathing and vocal exercises.

'Place the sound in the resonators at the front of the face (in the mask)'

The sound is made in the larynx and comes out through the mouth. It only goes into the nasal cavities if you sing with a nasal quality (usually reserved for nasal consonants, French nasal vowels or dramatic characterisation). The singer may feel a sensation of vibrations in the front of the face, if this happens when the voice is working well, then it can be a useful reminder to the singer. If the singer feels no particular sensation here it is simply because there are no special cavities in the skull for aiding vocal resonance.

'Children shouldn't be taught singing technique, it may damage their voices'

Learning a technique for any physical skill is merely discovering how to do the task with the least effort. If technique is taught at the right level for the individual, it will make singing easier and more enjoyable for her. It is rare for singing to cause pathological damage to the voice. The more common problem for singers is entrenched bad habits, which can remain throughout life. These bad habits can arise from either poor tuition, or just from a lack of guidance. For example, it's very unlikely that a singer will acquire good breathing technique without some

help from a teacher. If the child is taught skills from a young age, they will be able to enjoy singing to the best of their ability.

'Singing is best done with an open throat, a yawning sensation may help'

The throat is a very versatile squeeze tube. The wrong constrictions will limit flexibility, add unnecessary tension and may result in a less-pleasant sound. The right constrictions allow us to form all of our vowels and consonants, as well as the exciting upper partials in the sound. The secret is, of course, to know the difference between them. A yawning action will lift the soft palate (good) and depress the back of the tongue (not good), pushing it down onto the top of the larynx. This reduces the mobility of the larynx and can result in a hooty sound. It can also limit the release of the jaw and rise of the soft palate. Any tongue tension will prevent clear articulation of vowels and consonants.

'Sing badly and you'll get nodules'

Vocal fold nodules rarely have a single cause, they tend to occur as a result of a combination of factors: the most common of which is anxiety, the most unlikely cause is bad singing technique. They can occur as a result of poor voice use in other contexts such as sport or unsupervised singing. Of all vocal fold pathologies, nodules are relatively easy to treat.

'Boys and girls have different voices'

You may think that, in general, girls are better at singing. It has also been said that the sound of a high-quality boys' choir cannot be matched by that of a girls' choir. Research has shown that even experts couldn't tell the difference between the two [1]. Once children's voices are trained, there is no difference between girls and boys until they reach puberty. The differences in untrained voices are cultural, not physical.

'Children shouldn't sing difficult songs, their voices can't manage it'

All voices have limitations, regardless of age or sex. There are some difficult songs that can be sung by certain children, and some that can't. To simplify the

classification, we can look at what makes a vocal task difficult. Because of the way in which the larynx works, anything that is high, loud, fast or long can be considered as a vocal extreme. By looking in more detail at voices at each stage of development, we can understand both the potential and the limits of the voice. With this knowledge we are better placed to decide what can be learnt and what can't.

'Cathedral choristers are more likely to get voice problems'

One would imagine that this is quite likely: these children are performing to high professional standards every day. This places them under high levels of vocal and emotional pressure. My own PhD research into choristers' vocal health showed that the opposite was in fact true, the choristers had healthier voices than any other group of children whom I assessed. It is likely that children under pressure can adapt: they develop strategies to limit the impact of the activity and preserve their singing voices.

These are just a few of the myths to be reinterpreted; there are many other examples of misperceptions in the way in which singing has been taught in the past. If we are to question these methods, this can make teachers uncomfortable. We all seek security in our belief systems; when these are challenged, emotions can run high. What we will actually find is that all of these ideas have arisen with the best possible intentions; the problems occur when they are misinterpreted.