

Time To Face The Music: Reality Check for Senior Singers & Their Teachers

by Sangeetha Rayapati

Slowly but surely, voice teachers across the globe are consistently turning their attention toward Senior Singers; those in retirement, generally over 60 years old. Baby boomers have “aged up” and are taking up new studies or continuing their study of singing. Choirs are forming that cater to the senior singer. The evidence of our attention to them has been clear at regional NATS conferences and ACDA workshops where teachers, choir directors, and senior singers themselves consistently share and seek information on how the voice ages and how to deal with those changes. Troubles with unwieldy vibrato, decreasing phrase lengths, limited singable ranges, and other nagging issues plague students and teachers who want to encourage music making through song both in solo and ensemble formats. As further evidence of the influence of senior singers, the body of published research directly addressing these issues continues to grow. Teachers can consult a handful of books including mine, “Sing Into Your Sixties, and Beyond!” (Inside View Press) that directly address the needs of aging voices. Most recently, our spring 2014 issue of InterNos included a summary guide to teaching those over 50 years old.

These resources are most helpful. Our interpersonal conversations are wonderful too, and while many of us have taught senior singers for quite some time, we have not had a platform in which to discuss our experiences and gather new teaching techniques. Some of us have only had sporadic encounters with senior singers and never get consistent practice applying the research or pedagogy for this demographic. Still others have had negative experiences with either voices or personalities in this demographic and are reticent to try teaching them again. These situations reveal that we, as professionals, need to consistently and clearly address best approaches for teaching senior singers.

The practicalities of the anatomical and physiological changes to the voice are relatively easy to address. What is more difficult is the conversation about the value of investing in this demographic and the ways we deal with the non-physiological challenges that these singers present. More importantly, the sensitive questions that address self-esteem and self-image through music are difficult to discuss outside of personal conversations. How do we or should we ever tell someone that their sound really isn't pretty? Is there ever a time to tell someone that they should stop singing? How do we approach the singer who really needs to move from the soprano repertoire or section to alto or mezzo repertoire? The message



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that has risen to the surface for me is that a certain level of reality checks is necessary for our community of teachers to have successful interactions between senior singers and vocal music.

Reality Check #1: Expectations

Both voice teachers and choir directors know that senior singers are not going away. In fact, our census data shows us that the numbers of seniors will continue to increase as the baby boom generation ages. What remains under our control are methods of engaging with them and expectations for their singing and learning.

Even though we live in a world of immediacy we must remember that little is immediate about the results of teaching aging singers. There are so many variables on their sound that an approach that worked one week may not work the next. The uncertainty of the vocal mechanism that is inherent in an aging voice means there will be a lack of consistency, and we as teachers, need to be prepared for this. Absences due to illness or travel can also contribute to a lack of consistency. Having policies in place to handle such events is a good way to maximize the positive effect you can have on your students' singing. Offering a set number of weeks of lessons and agreeing on that schedule ahead of time can help manage the back tracking that will occur if a student is not in regular attendance. It also allows the teacher a mechanism for tailoring overall experience to address individual goals for performance or learning. Research shows that adult learners are goal oriented and this approach, rather than a “let's see what can happen” approach is more effective.

No quick fixes means that teachers of senior singers must be prepared for a bigger time commitment. It takes more time to research and find the right keys of each piece that allow the best of

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your senior singer's voice to show. It takes time to develop trusting relationships so singers can allow themselves to be vulnerable. That trust and vulnerability to critique is one of the only ways to get to a place where a senior singer can accept some vocal changes that are more permanent. It also takes patience, especially when the results of joint efforts seem to yield little result or force an acceptance of a new vocal reality. Cultivating a patient attitude in oneself and one's students means not trying to accomplish too much in one session. Slow down. Be willing to take the time to have difficult conversations about the impact of aging on the voice. Seniors want to be valued, not ostracized or passed over. Taking time to be patient with them is one of the only ways to show them they are valued and accomplish your joint singing goals.

Reality Check #2: Honesty

Once a positive teacher-student relationship has been established and expectations for progress discussed, it becomes the responsibility of BOTH teacher and student to be honest about what is happening in their work together. Seniors have consistently told me that it is really difficult to function as a singer not knowing what kind of sound will come out of their mouths. They talk of self-images changing because they can't sing the things in public that they had in the past.

The best example of this reality and the place of honesty in the teacher-student relationship is from this past year of teaching, when I spent significant time preparing a Bach cantata aria with one of my seniors for presentation at her church. In lessons, we played with phrase lengths of melismatic passages so she could sing them well. We worked with vowel production to address consistencies of tone. We worked with breath and musical line following techniques I've established, to deal with a heavier vibrato that had developed over years of singing in an imbalanced way. Despite the confidence built in this studio work and in her private practice sessions, this

singer believed she had failed at the performance (receiving some negative comments from her family and feeling a general sense of confusion during the performance) and quite possibly would not be asked to sing again in church. After having been a soloist for years, she was distraught at the idea of not having this musical outlet. As a teacher, I was faced with picking up her spirits, questioning my methods, and finding a path through an emotionally charged experience that would keep us able to work together well into the future. At

two follow-up lessons, she asked me to tell her the truth about her vibrato, and I did. But I went further and explained how we would have to work around that issue and others. Issues of tessitura, tempo, phrase length, and range all were addressed. Now, rather than accepting every opportunity that comes her way at church, she is more selective about what she is willing to sing. She is more flexible about the repertoire I give her because she knows that even if she likes one version of a song better, a different key or different setting will show the positive parts of her voice best. This was the case recently with *My Lord, What a Mornin'*. She came in wanting to sing Mark Hayes' setting but we settled on one by Harry T. Burleigh because her voice functioned better on it. She is more trusting of my approach because she knows that I will tell her what DOESN'T work as well as praise her for what does. She also is more willing to tell me when she doesn't understand what I'm asking. Honesty has improved our communication and led to more consistency in her singing.

If we teach senior singers through grounded pedagogy, realistic expectations and honesty in relationship we will have less difficulty addressing those tough questions of self-esteem and self-image in music. We won't have to belabor the question of how to tell singers to switch voice parts, change repertoire, or discuss limits on performing. Singers will be knowledgeable and self-aware because we set an example of patience, understanding, and flexibility. This attitude gives them the ability to approach their singing outside of the studio with confidence rather than cowardice, a certain recipe for living a joyful life in music.

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