

NSA and Inclusion of Children in an Audition Culture

By Dana Lentini and Karen Brunssen

In the fall of 2023, NATS announced that new Children and Youth Categories had been added to the annual NATS National Student Auditions (NSA). These new categories speak to the association's desire to expand our mission of *transforming lives through the power of singing* to include those who are beginning their singing journey far before high school. The Advisory Panel for the formation of these categories includes leading experts in pedagogy for younger pre-pubescent singers. We discussed unique requirements for these ages, various genres, repertoire, and vocal expectations. The categories are musical theatre, classical, and commercial music in age ranges 11 and under or 11 to 14. NATS now includes all age groups for a full spectrum of NSA auditions at the chapter, region, and national levels.



Dana Lentini



Karen Brunssen

build transferable skills for self-awareness, a growth mindset, personal goal setting, and the benefits of helpful feedback. This will set a healthy precedence as younger developing singers come to expect vocal improvement, begin to read music, and accumulate songs they love to sing. Hearing their peers and singers in older categories can inspire them about their own vocal growth and repertoire

choices, preparing them positively for vocal changes during puberty.

"Singing is a life skill, and everyone can benefit from studying singing."

The Purpose of Adding Children to the NSA

NATS Student Auditions have expanded over the past few years with a variety of genres and gender-neutral categories. Now they also include children and youth for a much larger representation of the lifespan. Some chapters and regions had previously welcomed children and youth to their student auditions. Now all NATS entities have the infrastructure needed for these categories to be a regular part of student auditions at the chapter, region, and national levels.

Children and youth will be introduced to vocal and musical support, encouragement, and expectations as they prepare for and participate in our dynamic student auditions. NATS Student Auditions were never intended to be a "talent competition." Rather, they are "auditions" with an opportunity for students to prepare repertoire and gain experience while developing skills needed to perform their repertoire. They are able to perform for adjudicator members who offer encouragement and age-appropriate constructive feedback.

Benefits for Young Singers

Auditioning will provide younger singers with a sense of community as these new categories bring them together in one place to display and share their singing. They will

Audition protocols help to normalize communal expectations for children to display foundational skills for suitable tone quality, breath, alignment, diction, musicianship, artistry, presentation, and interpretation in the style of their category. We may notice more motivation as they spend time practicing technical elements of voice study or learn a new song they heard at the auditions.

Benefits for NATS

NATS is the largest voice teacher association in the world. Our rubrics for NSA help establish consistency and authority for the markers of achievement in singing. These markers are recognized and referenced by many. NATS reviews rubrics and information regularly.

We hope that a "singing for all" mission will encourage more to take lessons, bringing more clients to the current amassed group of independent voice teachers and others who work with younger singers. Singing is a life skill, and everyone can benefit from studying singing. Let's create more business so our members thrive. For thousands of NATS members and their students, commitment and participation in NSA has led to a long-term engagement with singing and NATS. By encouraging young singers to foster a curiosity and love

for singing, we are creating the next generation of singers, singing teachers, and singing supporters. Not every singer will choose to pursue singing or teaching as a profession, but many will look for impactful ways and purposes to sing throughout their lives.

Adjudicating Children and Youth Categories

While many of our NATS teachers are familiar with teaching and adjudicating children, we recognize that this is new for many others. When it comes to teaching and adjudicating singing, children are not miniature adults. Going forward, it will be important to understand the differences to ensure appropriate feedback.

“We must take care to acknowledge a child’s ability as an individual rather than compared to others.”

Childhood is a time of constant non-uniform growth and development. One size does not fit all. Two children of the same age can be at two completely different stages of development. We must take care to acknowledge a child’s ability as an individual rather than compared to others. The size of the child’s larynx and lungs is much smaller than those of adults. The layers of the vocal folds are changing. The hard palate is not fully formed, and the vocal tract is constantly developing. Baby teeth fall out and are replaced by adult teeth throughout childhood. Neuromuscular coordination takes time to develop. It is easy to see why children may not be able to hold long phrases, enunciate with ideal diction, or command their body to convey an elegant performance!

We will all gain a lifespan perspective of the singing voice over the years ahead as we regularly witness vocal development of singing from childhood through adulthood. These new categories promote inclusion of singing for all ages and challenges NATS members to learn about realistic vocal and musical expectations, repertoire, and science-informed pedagogy relative to these young singers in addition to singing during post-pubertal ages and beyond.

We encourage you to explore NSA Children and Youth Resources and NSA Rubrics and Categories on the NATS website to as you prepare to adjudicate our new Children and Youth Categories.

[NSA Children and Youth Resources](#)

[NSA Categories](#)

Our Invitation to All Voice Teachers

We know NATS National Student Audition experiences at the chapter, region, and national levels promote singing skills, artistry, and community for all participants. For those who work with young singers we hope you will encourage your young singers to participate in this new experience. We hope all will promote the narrative of voice lessons as an option for young singers. We hope pedagogy courses will include pediatric vocal pedagogy as a norm for future voice teachers and music educators.

NATS continues to set the pace in our field by giving care and consideration to the many ways we can support the future of the art of singing and singing teachers. Join us as we cultivate our newest NSA categories for Children and Youth!

*After cultivating techniques as a singer, performer, and music educator, **Dana Lentini** created *Born 2 Sing Kids* to nurture the development of young singers through a systematic and customized approach. Through various forms of mentorship, she helps teachers learn about the unique differences in teaching singing to children and how to build their own successful studios. Lentini has been sought after as a presenter for professional music organizations including the National Association of Teachers of Singing, as well as for universities. Her specialized approach to teaching can be found in “Teaching the Child Singer: Pediatric Pedagogy for Ages 5–13.” She also shares a unique spiral approach to repertoire development in her newly released “Singing Kids’ Songbook,” both published by Hal Leonard. More information about Lentini’s consulting, courses, and resources on teaching children in the private studio are offered through her website at danalentini.com.*

***Karen Brunssen**, mezzo soprano and professor of voice at Bienen School of Music, Northwestern University, exemplifies the integration of performance excellence with scholarly insight. As past president of the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS), Brunssen’s leadership has significantly influenced voice education. Her publication, “The Evolving Singing Voice: Changes Across the Lifespan,” offers a groundbreaking perspective on vocal development, informed by her extensive performing career across the United States and Europe. Brunssen’s contributions to voice pedagogy and her dedication to student success, both on the stage and in academic settings, reflect her status as a distinguished figure in the field.*