

Singing for Joy

By Elizabeth Turner

As a young voice student preparing for conservatory, I primarily focused on perfecting my sight-reading, getting top all-state honors as an alto, and obtaining solos for my college portfolio. More than a decade later, as a voice instructor, I naturally assumed my voice students would be as well. Boy, was I wrong. While some students have displayed immense discipline and dedication, the majority of my private voice students just want to sing for joy!

Questions I've asked students include: "Do you have any auditions coming up?" to which they answer "No." "How about any performances in the future?" Again, "No."

"Would you like to work on any theory? Are you going to major in music?" "No, I just want to sing for fun." I was so taken aback that some students had so little interest in improving their range, intonation, diction, breathing methods, microphone technique, or audition anxiety. They just wanted to sing new songs and discover new artists. At first, I would have thought any voice teacher was a failure for not motivating their students enough and encouraging healthy musicianship. However, over the past five years, and throughout the pandemic, I've come to realize that singing is, first and foremost, about joy.

In 2020, my private online teaching skyrocketed, with more than 100 voice and piano students a week. When COVID-19 hit, I thought I would lose all my students. I thought the pandemic would bring down people's morale, but students, young and old, were itching to be creative and find their voices! Thanks to the wonderful platform Outschool, my business grew tenfold, with students from across the globe eager to make music. Students ranged from the teenage girl trying to find her confidence with Adele to the young boy in South America wanting to learn to sing in English. I also gained adult students: from a mature woman recovering from knee surgery wanting to play piano again to politicians picking up a guitar and experimenting with songwriting for the first time.

But I was starting to feel burnt out and wasn't sure I could give so many private students my time and energy. I was stressing myself out if a student didn't get a full scholarship to Berklee. This is when a switch flipped in my brain, and I realized that competitions, performing at Carnegie Hall,



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and auditioning for summer stock are not every aspiring musician's goals. That some musicians may never want to be nominated for a Grammy, or perform for 1,000 people. They may just want to sing for themselves at home in their bedrooms, busk at their local coffee shops, or sing Christmas carols at a nursing home. How dare I be the one to take that joy away from them?

From these observations, I've derived what I consider to be the primary purposes of singing:

Confidence and Self-Expression

As voice teachers, we sometimes get to teaching voice last. A student may first need to build confidence, core identity, and emotional well-being. The singing just helps or adds to that. Singing is what they look forward to each week — it gives them hope and a positive outlook. They may not want to be critiqued at all.

I've worked with voice students from all walks of life, students whose parents have been incarcerated, or adult students going through divorces, or diagnosed with cancer — where singing has been their only source of joy. Henri Matisse said, "Creativity takes courage." As voice teachers, we should first encourage students to sing fearlessly, loud and proudly, and to feel comfortable in their own skin. That is when the real music-making and artistry can begin. We can guide students through this process, but it does not happen overnight. While voice teachers may be renowned for their own technique, repertoire, or industry experience, our most powerful tools are support, nurturance, and trust. If we fail to build these, an engaging relationship with the student and the art form is nearly impossible to build later.

Social-Emotional Component

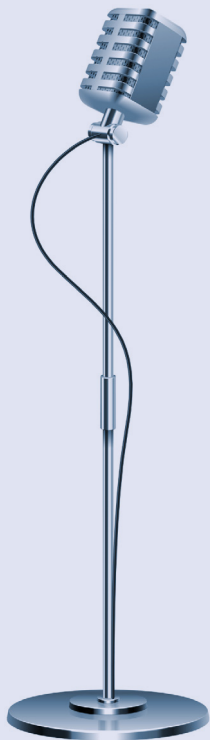
Some days in my studio, music is the last topic we discuss. In the last few years, I've had to be a therapist, a firefighter (literally, when my soprano's car caught fire in the school parking lot during our dress rehearsal), a carpool driver to rehearsal, and a FAFSA advisor for first-generation college students. Across backgrounds, students need someone to talk to, vent with, or seek advice from. Maya Angelou's quote rings true nowadays: "People will forget what you've said, people will forget what you did, but people will never

forget how you made them feel.” As a music educator, it’s easy to get wrapped up in teaching the right rhythms, pronunciation, crescendos, and harmonies. But if we can first show our students empathy, understanding, respect, and value, we are teaching what music is all about.

Some in the field may argue that this approach could lead to robbing students of their money or time, not really teaching the craft, or giving false ideals, but I see it differently. We must teach our students that music and the use of their voices will build bridges in our nation and across the globe. The arts nurture cross-cultural communication and understanding. These days, it’s no longer about singing every staccato perfectly or harmony tightly; that time and perfection will come. For your next voice session with your student, I encourage you to start your lesson by allowing them to sing for pleasure. A song of their choice, even if it is for a role they could never play. I am confident that this approach will lead to more long-term commitment to the arts.



Elizabeth A. Turner, Ed.D., is director of performing arts at Georgetown Visitation Preparatory School in Washington, D.C. In this capacity, she spearheads faith-based performing arts offerings for young women at the pre-collegiate level. She holds a B.M. and M.M. from the Berklee College of Music in Vocal Performance, and an Ed.D. in leadership and innovation from St. Thomas University.



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Guidelines for submitting articles for Independent Voices

Spring deadline: July 15
Fall deadline: January 15

- Current *independent* member of NATS (not teaching primarily at a university): Professional/Emerging Professional/Pre-Professional, Emeritus
- 1,000 to 2,500 words
- Preferably written in “first person”
- Any topic that is relevant to independent voice studio teachers, collaborative pianists, choral directors...
- Attach as Word doc or Mac Pages, standard font (Times New Roman, Arial, Helvetica)
- Include 100-word or less author bio at the bottom of the document. (See bio examples in [past articles](#).)
- Photos: required high resolution headshot (jpg) and optional additional photos (jpg) related to the article. Important: *Do not imbed photos into the document. Send as separate attachments.*

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