

The Elevation of Semi-Private Lessons

An interview with Christin Coffee Rondeau

by Cynthia Vaughn

Let's face it. "Group Voice" in the independent studio has had a serious image problem. As a voice teacher community we've been discussing the benefits of small group learning for years. Research and practice have shown us that group study is a highly beneficial way to learn. There are also financial advantages to both clients and teachers. However, we've lamented the lack of buy-in from clients. Most parents and students have been conditioned to believe that private lessons are always best. Some studios, like Christin Coffee Rondeau's studio (co-founded with flute teacher Sarah Robertson), are leaning into small group classes and rebranding them as "semi-private lessons."

Inter Nos: Your studio, Sand Dollar Music in Centerville, Ohio, has recently rebranded group voice class as "semi-private lessons." Brilliant! How are clients responding to this concept of "elevated" group voice study?

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Christin Coffee Rondeau: Thanks! I'll be honest: I'm sure I didn't coin the term "semi-private lessons" (I can't remember where I first heard it), and there are lots of other studios out there doing lessons like this. I'm following in a long line of smart studio owners like Sarah Bucher, Cara Transtrom, and many others who had the foresight to figure out this model, and I'm grateful for their work and inspiration!



Sarah Robertson and Christin Coffee Rondeau,
Sand Dollar Music

So far, clients seem to be responding well. They're excited to see their kids gaining skill and confidence through working in these small groups. I think we (voice professionals) tend to think of 1:1 lessons as the standard because that's what we were raised with, but families who are new to voice training don't necessarily have that expectation coming in, so it's easier to explain the model to them. (Whereas it took me years to offer semi-private lessons because I've taken private lessons my whole life and just couldn't imagine how it would work — I had that "curse of knowledge" bias!)

Inter Nos: What ages do you teach in semi-private lessons? How many are in each group? How did you determine the age groups and what does it mean to "carefully curate" the groups? Are students auditioned?

CFF: We have two course options now — ages 7-11 and ages 12-15. When there's a demand — and I believe there will be soon — we'll offer a class for the younger ages as well. There are between 4-8 singers in each group. 8 is the max for sure.

We broke down the ages based on a number of factors, including typical attention spans, emotional maturity, and vocal development. One of our goals for the classes is to build camaraderie and a sense of community, and we wanted singers to be in similar age groups so they could work on repertoire together and cheer each other on from a place of empathy and solidarity.

When we say the groups are "carefully curated," we mean that we're thoughtful and intentional about the needs, goals, and personalities of each singer in the class—how they'll interact with the other students, what additional support or information they might need from the teacher, and what kind of repertoire and activities will serve them well, keep them engaged, and set them up for a lifetime of confident, joyful music making.

Students are not auditioned, but the teaching team is continually assessing what kind of support they need and how we can best help them grow.

Inter Nos: Your inaugural classes are January 2023 – May 2023. Will there be year-round classes next Fall? Can students join after the start date?

CFF: Yes, this program is relatively new, but we plan to continue it indefinitely. Students can join after the start date — we just pro-rate the missed lessons. Eventually, I think we'll get into a year-round flow of enrollment.

Inter Nos: What are the benefits of group study for youth and teen singers?

Great question! The pre-teen and teen years are when we typically see singers transition out of general music classes and children's choirs and into private lessons. However, those years can be pretty isolating for singers. Their voices are changing at a rapid pace, and it can feel frustrating, overwhelming, and lonely, no matter how careful we are to reassure them. Working in intentional community with other singers reinforces for them that they're not alone in what they're experiencing and that they're not doing anything "wrong." Pre-teens and teens are so quick to blame themselves for any difficulty in their singing! For singers who are intimidated by performing alone, semi-private lessons offer the option to work in duets and trios rather than focusing on solo work. And for singers who really want to learn to sing parts and harmonize by ear, they have built-in practice partners. They can work on a variety of repertoire in an environment that allows them to learn to trust themselves and each other.

Inter Nos: What are the benefits for the families?

Tuition is lower than private lessons, which is a huge benefit for many families! They also have peace of mind knowing that their kids are developing a new skill in a team environment where they are challenged, valued, and encouraged by both teachers and students! It's also not necessarily an "either/or" thing. We have some families who opted to keep their private lessons and use the voice class as a supplement to what's happening in lessons. That's really exciting!



Inter Nos: What are the benefits for the teachers?

It helps us serve a greater number of students in less time. We only have so many hours in the day, and we would rather work with people ASAP than put them on a wait list until a private lesson spot opens up! (Which could take months or even years depending on the teacher!) For those of us who are extroverts, it also adds variety into our teaching day, as the emotional pacing and output is very different in private lessons vs. semi-private lessons.

"There are between four to eight singers in each group. Eight is the max for sure."

Inter Nos: Do you plan to add semi-private lessons for adults in the future?

I would LOVE that! Got any advice for me? :)

Inter Nos: Finally, what is your advice for teachers who would like to incorporate semi-private lessons into their own studios?

1. Don't overthink it. You're going to want to get everything perfect. And you won't. And that's ok, because just like singing, teaching is an imperfect work. It's ok to acknowledge to your students and their parents that they're

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part of something new and that you appreciate them journeying with you.

2. Plan more activities than you think you need. Kids' and teens' attention spans and interests can be all over the place, so at least at first, you're going to want to spend some time lesson planning and developing your "bag of tricks" so that you can keep them engaged (and, to quote our beloved Nikki Loney, "Compliance does not equal engagement.").
3. Ask them what would make the class meaningful to them — do it both in person in class and privately through their

parent via email/Google survey/etc. It's easy to customize the course to the learner, but you have to know what they want to learn first.

4. Get well-versed in contemporary music. They're going to want to sing the songs that *they* love, and we get to help them select repertoire that serves their voices and goals.
5. Have a plan, but stay flexible. If the class is really locking on to a particular activity, song, or concept, go with it! There will always be time to get back to the lesson plan, so enjoy the freedom of spontaneous collaboration when it arises!

Soprano **Christin Coffee Rondeau** is obsessed with voices. Hers. Yours. Everyone's. What makes them soar, shine, swing, and sparkle. She holds a bachelor's degree (Mercer University) and master's degree (Miami University) in vocal performance, along with training in Orff Schulwerk and Estill. A warm and versatile performer, her repertoire spans from art song to musical theatre to opera to jazz standards. There's not much she won't sing, but she's happiest when collaborating on challenging musical projects with good friends. Her writing has been featured in the 4th Edition of Robert Sataloff's "Professional Voice: The Science and Art of Clinical Care," in several NATS Inter Nos issues, and at *The Full Voice*. She has been a guest on *The Full Voice*, *The Voice Culture*, and *Vocal Fri* podcasts. She serves as community manager and copy writing coach for *The SpeakEasy Cooperative* and has presented at conferences for the National Association of Teachers of Singing and *The SpeakEasy Cooperative*. Coffee Rondeau is co-founder and voice and piano studio director of Sand Dollar Music in Dayton, Ohio where she works with singers and teacher-singers — helping them make the sounds, art, and impact they want to make. In addition to her work as a teacher/singer, Coffee Rondeau is an aspiring aerialist, regularly training on aerial silks and Lyra. Find out more or get in touch at sanddollarmusic.com.



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NATS NEWS

Emerging composers find support, value in NATS program

NATS
A lot of creative ideas have been exchanged since we announced the 10 pairs of veteran and early-career composers for our 2022-23 Mentoring Program for Composers this past fall. This is the third time NATS has offered the free program designed to encourage the creation of new works. We caught up with several participants, and it seems they are finding tremendous value in the program.

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