

Teaching Singing to Students with Vision Loss

Charlotte Surkin



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INTRODUCTION

WHETHER YOU TEACH IN A UNIVERSITY SETTING, a local music school, a private studio, or conduct a choir, you sooner or later may encounter a student with vision loss. According to the National Federation of the Blind, 2.7% of the population report a visual disability or significant vision loss. The largest portion of those are age 65 and older, with 6.4% of that demographic reporting vision loss.¹ It is likely, then, that in the course of your career a student who struggles with vision impairment will enter your studio.

Few resources exist for voice teachers who instruct those with vision loss. This article purports to provide much needed information to help teachers more effectively teach students thus afflicted; it is based on current research and the author's own personal experience teaching vision impaired students.

There are two main categories of vision loss, low vision or partial blindness and complete blindness. Those with vision loss are people who, even with the aid of glasses and/or contact lenses, cannot meaningfully distinguish visual images, such as typical print in a book or newspaper. When the vision loss is total it is called blindness.² People with low vision have some remaining, usable vision, and the vision that remains can be used to help accomplish activities of daily living.

Specific examples of various eye conditions that affect learning music include the following:

- A *cataract* is a clouding of the lens of the eye, causing partial or complete blindness. Cataract is the leading cause of blindness worldwide,³ and makes text and music appear as if viewed through foggy glasses or a frost covered window.
- *Diabetic retinopathy* is the result of damage to the retina caused by complications of diabetes. Because symptoms are not usually present until treatment is ineffective, screening of diabetic patients for eye problems is paramount. Symptoms may include "curtain falling," floaters, and decreased visual acuity due to edema.⁴
- *Glaucoma* diseases are caused by increased intraocular pressure, causing damage to the optic nerve. Symptoms include decreased vision, "halos" when looking at lights, headache, and eye pain.⁵
- *Age related macular degeneration* is a degenerative disease of the central portion of the retina that results in loss of central vision. Activities such as

reading, driving, and other daily tasks are negatively affected. Patients notice gradual loss of vision, requiring magnification or brighter lights for reading.⁶

INTRODUCING THE STUDENT TO THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

How do you know whether a student has low vision? One should always approach the question of low vision with a great deal of sensitivity. Use of a comprehensive voice questionnaire in every teaching situation will enable the teacher not only to be acquainted with the musical background of the student, but also to recognize whether the student has a physical limitation.

When a vision impaired student enters the studio, begin by describing the physical layout to help him or her become comfortable with the space. Guide the student through the room, explaining where things are located. Do not move or change the furniture during the lesson or from week to week.

If you walk with a student as a sighted guide, negotiate stairs and doors. You can do this by walking in front of the student and having him or her hold your elbow. If you are walking through a door, pull your elbow into your body, as a signal to move closer to you. Both verbal and nonverbal communication is important, as I learned from a mobility training course at the Lighthouse Guild, an organization dedicated to advocacy for the blind. When encountering stairs, some students will want to know how many steps are in front of them, and some will say, "I never count steps."

Guide Dogs

Many vision impaired individuals gain independence through the assistance of a guide dog. These dogs are specifically bred and trained to aid people with their everyday routines. Differences in the emotional temperament of various breeds are an important part of choosing dogs for suitability as guide dogs. Breeds selected must be high in confidence and low in aggression, and low in measures of fearfulness. Labrador Retrievers and Labrador-Golden Retriever crosses are the most likely to pass these tests, and are therefore popular breeds for guide dogs.⁷

Only adults use guide dogs. If your student has a guide dog, ask permission before petting the dog. One

misconception about guide dogs is that the dog guides the person. Rather, the person must be in charge and lead the way. If you are in a choral situation, a guide dog should sit underneath the singer's chair during rehearsals. In addition, be aware that some singers in the choir might be allergic to dogs. If that is the case, put the dog in another room out of respect for the fellow singer. During performances, it is unwise to allow the dog to be on the stage with the owner. Finally, if the guide dog is very attached to its owner and is in the audience with another person, there is a possibility the dog might start crying during the performance. The owner has to know the personality of the dog in order to make the best performance decision.

Singing teachers must also be aware that students who use guide dogs may have stiffness and tension in the arm and neck on the side that is being led by the dog. The voice teacher must observe whether or not they are compensating on the other side of their body.

PHYSICAL ASPECTS OF TEACHING SINGERS WITH VISION LOSS

We all access information visually, aurally, or kinesthetically. Most people assume singers with low vision will not be visual learners, but this is not always the case. Do not assume every singer who is blind or visually impaired has "a great ear." As with most of the population, some do and some do not. Your instruction may be more hands-on and more verbal when working with students who are blind or have low vision. As with any student, ask permission before touching, and explain what you will do and its purpose.

Posture and body alignment is stressed just as with sighted students. Using elements of the Alexander Technique, which in itself is very hands-on, can be helpful. Frequently, a student with low or no vision may not as easily understand some perceptions of physical functions. For example, when attempting to do a tongue stretch, students will think they are stretching their tongue forward out of their mouths, when actually they are not. Students may think they are releasing their jaw when they are not. Try placing their index fingers in the space between the temporal bone and the mandible so they can feel that physical sensation.

PERFORMANCE CONSIDERATIONS

When a student walks with a cane or with the assistance of a guide dog, it is obvious that the student needs assistance. But most of the seeing community is not programmed to believe that someone has low vision when it is not obvious. Nowhere is that more apparent than in performance situations.

Lighting differences and other variables can be confusing for someone with vision loss. When a student with vision loss is backstage in a dark area and then goes on the stage with bright lights, their vision is negatively affected. Accommodating this with sensitive lighting will assist in the transition.

For students with low vision or blindness, many options exist to assist them in reading music.

Braille Music. Some students read Braille music. Braille tactile notation was named after its creator, Frenchman Louis Braille, and he developed both an alphabet system and a music code.⁸ The Braille system as used today, however, evolved further during the twentieth century, and still evolves as a representation of printed material.⁹

Braille characters are small rectangular blocks, called cells, that contain tiny palpable bumps called raised dots. The same six-dot Braille cell used in literary Braille is used for Braille music, although an entirely different meaning is attached to each symbol. Braille music is not written on a staff and clef signs and bar lines are nonexistent. After learning the musical alphabet, Braille users find the actual location or pitch of the note designated by an octave sign. Measures are indicated by spaces. Braille music learners must learn music theory and understand the concept of intervals much earlier and much more securely than print music users. Braille music uses “Fixed Do” solfege (Figure 1).

Braille notation for the opening of the operatic aria “Voi che sapete” from Mozart’s *Le nozze di Figaro* is shown in Figure 2. When songs are printed in two or more languages, the English Braille is written on top of the foreign language. The musical notation is indented in the Braille. In this example, the flat sign is notated, and then the number sign. Moving down to the second and third line, we read the English and then the Italian. The fourth line, which is indented, indicates the musical notation. The singer reads the Braille as a third line B-flat

Solfege Syllable	Braille Character	Letter Name
do	⠠	dots 1-4-5 C
re	⠡	dots 1-5 D
mi	⠢	dots 1-2-4 E
fa	⠣	dots 1-2-4-5 F
sol	⠤	dots 1-2-5 G
la	⠥	dots 2-4 A
ti	⠦	dots 2-4-5 B
do	⠠	dots 1-4-5 C

Figure 1. Table of solfege syllables and corresponding Braille notation.

in the fourth octave. Then the next two Braille lines are the words and the indented last Braille line indicates the last two measures of music, including the Braille notation for slur markings, rests and the double bar.

The Filomen M. D’Agostino Greenberg Music School of Lighthouse Guild offers a children’s program, the Comprehensive Music Program for Young People (CMPYP) that offers Braille music instruction and emphasizes literacy.¹⁰ If an adult loses his or her vision, learning to read Braille notation and music may be difficult; adults generally do not have the same sensitivity in their fingers as children.

The Library of Congress maintains a large collection of Braille scores, which are circulated across the country postage-free. Many are also available for download, to be used on the BARD mobile application.¹¹

Large Print Music and Printed Lyrics. Students who have low vision but do not read Braille may be able to read music that is printed large. Those who do not read music may prefer to have only the lyrics printed. Start by showing the student various font sizes and ask which works best for him or her.

Type size should be large, preferably at least 16–18 points. Most students are comfortable with 32–48 point type size. Contrast is also important, using black text on white paper and bold print. The space between the lines

Voi che sa - pe - te, che co sa è, a - mor,
 You who have know - ledge, what is — love's sign.

Figure 2. An excerpt from “Voi che sapete” from Mozart’s *Le nozze di Figaro*.

should be 25% to 30% of the point size. This is because many people with partial sight have difficulty finding the beginning of each line while reading. Avoid complicated or decorative fonts. Use only standard serif or sans serif, which is not condensed. Spacing between letters should be wide. The Library of Congress, in addition to its extensive Braille music collection, also maintains a collection of large print music.¹²

Some students use a video magnifier to read regular print. In this case, extra wide margins allow for use of the magnifying device on a flat surface. The paper finish should also be non-glare.

Other Technology. If you have a voice student who has good computer skills and basic musicianship, he might want to become familiar with software that will enable him to learn his music more easily. The company Dancing Dots created an excellent low vision music reader called The Lime Lighter. This computer displays magnified music notation and magnifies music from 1.25 to 10 times the original size. It can change the screen from black notes onto white background or from white notes onto black background, and has as a foot pedal that scrolls the music for hands-free operation. A special stylus can be used for mark-ups, and the Lime Lighter has an audio playback at any tempo.¹³

If your student uses the PC Windows platform, accessible programs for Windows are Lime, Lime Aloud, Goodfeel, and Sharp Eye. For Macintosh, programs

include Pro Tools, Garage Band, and Logic Performer. Students can also use Finale and Sibelius with low vision options for both programs.

Vision Functioning Devices. There are various devices that visually impaired students use for reading music. Some of these are hand magnifiers, video magnifiers, reading telescopes, and absorptive lenses. Before using any of these aids, a student should see a low vision expert to help decide which device is the most appropriate.

Recording Lessons. Just as with students who are not vision impaired, recording lessons for later listening is helpful. For those who are technologically savvy, smart phones have made recording easy. Some programs allow for recording of the lesson as well as voice-activated reminders. Practice recordings with warmups, song texts, and melodies for facilitating music learning are also helpful.

CONCLUSION

Vision loss is not an inherent obstacle for studying voice or performing. With appropriate accommodation, a musician with vision loss may fully participate in music making at every level, from beginner through professional.

NOTES

1. Almost all statistics on blindness are estimated. National Federation of the Blind, “Blindness Statistics”; <https://nfb.org/blindness-statistics> (accessed March 1, 2018).

2. ADAM Medical Encyclopedia, "Blindness and Vision Loss"; <https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003040.htm> (accessed March 1, 2018).
3. Deborah S. Jacobs, "Cataract in adults," in *UpToDate* (Waltham: UpToDate, 2014).
4. Claire E. Fraser and Donald J. D'Amico, "Diabetic retinopathy: Classification and clinical features," in *UpToDate* (Waltham: UpToDate, 2014).
5. Jennifer S. Weizer, "Angle-closure glaucoma," in *UpToDate* (Waltham: UpToDate, 2014).
6. Jorge G. Arroyo, "Age-related macular degeneration: Clinical presentation, etiology, and diagnosis," in *UpToDate* (Waltham: UpToDate, 2014).
7. Lindsay R. Mehrkam and Clive D. L. Wynne, "Behavioral differences among breeds of domestic dogs (*Canis lupus familiaris*): Current status of the science," *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* 155 (June 2014): 12–27.
8. Braille's original system for notating music was first published in Louis Braille, *Procédé pour écrire les paroles, la musique et le plain-chant au moyen de points, à l'usage des aveugles et dispose pour eux* [Method of writing words, music and plain songs by means of dots for use by the blind and arranged for them] (Paris: Imprimerie des Enfants aveugles, 1829).
9. Frances Mary D'Andrea, "A history of instructional methods in uncontracted and contracted braille," *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness* 103, no. 10 (2009): 585–594; *CINAHL Plus with Full Text*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 7, 2018).
10. Filomen M. D'Agostino Greenberg Music School; www.lighthouseguild.org/programs-services/education/the-filomen-m-dagostino-greenberg-music-school/ (accessed February 10, 2018).
11. Library of Congress, *The National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped: Braille and Audio Reading Materials*; <https://www.loc.gov/nls/braille-audio-reading-materials/music-materials/> (accessed February 1, 2018). Additional resources are found at the National Resource Center for Blind Musicians (www.blindmusicstudent.org) and the Music Education Network for the Visually Impaired (www.menvi.org).
12. Library of Congress, *The National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped: Braille and Audio Reading Materials*; <https://www.loc.gov/nls/braille-audio-reading-materials/music-materials/> (accessed February 1, 2018).
13. Dancing Dots; www.dancingdots.com (accessed January 10, 2018).

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In July of 2017, Ms. Surkin presented a lecture at the International Conference for the College Music Society (CMS) in Sydney, Australia. Previous lectures were presented at the Voice Foundation in Philadelphia, The Comparative Voice Pedagogy Seminar through New York Singing Teachers Association (NYSTA), and the Grand Rounds for doctors at Lighthouse International.

Ms. Surkin has been on the Board of Directors of the New York Singing Teachers Association (NYSTA) for almost 20 years.

As a performer, Ms. Surkin has performed alto solos in over 30 major oratorios with orchestra in the Tri-State area, including two performances of *Messiah* in Carnegie Hall and the Kennedy Center in Washington D. C. Her operatic repertoire, ranging from Baroque to contemporary, includes performances in regional and local companies.

Her CD, *Uptown, Downtown* on Studio 21 label, features blues and jazz inspired songs. She also has a CD through Albany Records of a live performance of Jack Beeson's world premier, "Sorry, Wrong Number" Many of her students perform on Broadway as well as regional theater.

Ms. Surkin holds a Bachelor of Music Education (BMEd) degree from Temple University, an MA in music from New York University as well as a certificate in music from the Mozarteum in Salzburg, Austria. www.charlottesurkin.com

I bear the Scales, where hang in equipoise
 The night and day: and whereunto my lips
 I put my trumpet, with its stress and noise
 Fly the white clouds like tattered sails of ships;
 The tree-tops lash the air with sounding whips;
 Southward the clamorous sea-fowl wing their
 flight;
 The hedges are all red with haws and hips,
 The Hunter's Moon reigns empress of the night.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "September"