

BEGINNING THE PROCESS

INTRODUCTION

The finished work emerges through a process that begins somewhere....

To begin the process of becoming an artist in the world, the process of using the human voice to heighten the experiences of an audience, is a wonderful and potentially fulfilling prospect. How do you begin?

You might look at the lifetime of a singer. In one period, a singer might focus on building techniques of singing; in another, on interpreting great literature more profoundly; in yet another, on connecting to the audience, learning ways to move them toward heightened experiences. From the view of a singer's whole life, you can see that the work of a singer—and all that it entails—is always in flux. It occurs in a process in which the singer aims at many different aspects of singing, always pushing toward higher and more refined ideals and the expertise to realize those ideals.

In the five volumes of *Excellence in Singing*, we explore the question of how a singer becomes an artist. The beginning of that process is on or after the day she decides to aim at achieving excellence in singing. This is the day she commits herself to exploring the possibilities within her voice and the ways she can use those possibilities to create something magical for others. This is the day she commits to making an artistic statement.

She can commit to excellence while singing only for herself, while singing in a church choir, while singing in professional opera, or

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while singing in a theater. She can make the commitment to excellence when she is just beginning to sing or when she has sung for many years. She can make the commitment by helping others sing with excellence.

As she evolves as an artist, she aims at different ideals during different times in her life, with different skills, so she decides to make this commitment again and again.

But where does she begin?

Consider the analogy of a carpenter who begins his work when he decides to make something excellent with a piece of wood. Maybe his warehouse is full of raw, unfinished wood, or maybe sanded and cut pieces of wood. He begins with the materials and tools he has.

And from what warehouse does a singer pull her materials from? For the raw materials of singing, she draws upon the deep riches of life itself—its emotions, ideas, and range of experiences—and the morphology of her voice. She begins with the materials and tools she has. Ultimately, she works those materials into artistic expressions.

A singer needs to handle these beginnings with care. All of her advances—for any musical venue, skill level, aptitude, artistic statement—begin with embryonic concepts. She needs to nurture these beginnings and guide them to maturity.

In this volume, we want to discuss important issues and offer guidelines that apply to anyone making the commitment to excellence in singing. We address these beginning issues in the first two levels, Level 1, “Teaching and Learning at Multiple Levels” and Level 2, “Understanding the Voice at Multiple Levels.”

Teaching and Learning at Multiple Levels

Throughout these volumes, we describe the process of becoming an artist in the world as a process of learning. If we accept this premise, we can reason that wherever there is learning, there is teaching—even if the teaching is self-teaching. Teaching and learning become different sides of the same coin: the teaching side introduces and structures the process, and the learning side integrates the process. Consequently, we see the evolution of an artist as a continuous process of introducing and integrating the new and different qualities that raise the overall artistry to a higher level of excellence.

Though we write to you as the teacher, you can use this book when you teach yourself. We describe the teaching side of this process so that you can structure the work for the learning side of the process.

Many singers struggle during the teaching and learning process. Even if they begin with good voices, good talent, good work ethics, and good information, they can nevertheless trip up while assimilating new ideas, sounds, or sensations. The teaching and learning process itself may be too rigid to allow them to advance, to explore the necessary resources to support their artistic visions, or to cope with expectations of failure and success.

In this section, we want to help you help your student get a good start when she commits to singing with excellence. We explore this process in the chapters “Flexibility in Teaching and Learning,” “Flexibility in Noticing and Responding,” and “Flexibility at Multiple Levels.”

Flexibility in Teaching and Learning

The topics of singing seem to have many different paradigms for excellence and require different teaching: learning to breathe for singing is very different from learning to read a score or learning to perform for an audience. Each score offers unique challenges. And nobody seems to learn the same way. With unique skills, different music, and varying learning styles, teaching and learning is an art form. A great teacher always tailors this process for each individual, often guiding the process in new directions.

To manage its complexities, you need to define success for the overall teaching and learning process. With an umbrella idea of success, you can make the process adaptable for each individual, keep your students from becoming too rigid, and help liberate them as they progress. But given the uniqueness of each student—their detailed and idiosyncratic needs—how can anyone define universal success for teaching and learning?

Rather than impose a definition of excellence, you can allow one to emerge through the teaching and learning process itself. We discuss how the artistic targets of excellence form in the first place and evaluate whether that forming process is sound for yourself and your student. We then help you evaluate excellence in singing through a stochastic process, a living, dynamic process that comes through the hearts, minds, and souls of both you and your student.

Flexibility in Noticing and Responding

Teaching and learning singing evolves through noticing and responding to details about the sensations of singing. The details could relate to as wide a range of topics as the pace of the music, the fullness of your student's breath, or the position of her jaw on

key vowels. First you and your student notice particular details and then you both respond to them, over and over, in a continuous cycle. A lesson, rehearsal, or performance organizes itself around this cycle.

But what should you notice? What should you respond to? We explore these issues in this chapter.

Flexibility at Multiple Levels

Learning to sing as an artist, to take an audience into deep experiences, is a complex task. It requires learning at many different levels. We look at teaching and learning to sing as a multilevel process, in which you and your student are never just teaching and learning one thing.

Managing the whole, multilevel process is tricky. Our discussion could easily take us into abstract, philosophical ideas about artistic achievement. But the goal of this multivolume work is ultimately pragmatic—we want to help you make a difference in your student's voice, a difference that leads her to sing better. So we dismiss much of what we consider useless discussion and opt for what will actually help make a difference.

Understanding the Voice at Multiple Levels

The human voice is one of the most amazing processes in any living creature on this planet. From within its intricate structure, your student can produce a tremendous range of sounds—any of which can be used in artistic expressions.

One of the authors' basic presuppositions throughout these volumes is that the limitations of an individual student are not anywhere near as interesting as the possibilities within her voice.

You can always help your student move toward excellence. You can always help her find new and better sounds and new and better expressions, regardless of the kind of voice or personality she brings to you. Your student can spend a lifetime exploring her own voice and derive the satisfaction of becoming an artist, measured against the ideals and standards you and she establish for the teaching and learning process.

We also take the view that any real work to make a difference in your student's voice must be rooted in an accurate understanding of her voice. Just understanding the basics can dispel many flawed conceptions about what it means to sing, what it means to train a voice, and how to evaluate the possibilities within a voice.

There are many ways to think of how the voice works, however. In these volumes, we take from voice science those elements that help you understand the possibilities in your student's voice and the controls you need to influence to produce those possibilities. Consequently, we offer what we think are the most usable ways to understand how the voice works, always fully grounded in the latest discoveries in voice science but made relevant for teaching and learning.

You may also find viewing *The Singer's Voice*,¹ a five-title video series, helpful. We urge you to watch the videos, particularly *The Human Voice*,² as a companion to reading this section.

After reading this section, you should find the freedom to work creatively and uniquely with your student's voice without having to define its limitations. You should be able to see, as though with x-ray vision, the process of the voice itself as it produces the sounds you hear, and know what you can do to influence that process. The images in the chapter serve as a backdrop for the hundreds of exercises presented in this five-volume work.

ENDNOTES

1. Joan Wall and Robert Caldwell, *The Singer's Voice* (Redmond, Wash.: Pst...Inc., 1992–2000), 5 volumes of animated graphics and magnetic resonance imaging on the human voice.
2. Robert Caldwell, *The Human Voice* (Redmond, Wash.: Pst...Inc., 2001), animation.