

Dr. Bonnie Cutsforth-Huber, Professor of Music
Teaching Philosophy

When I tell new vocal students that “singers are athletes,” the response is often one of disbelief. I am a firm believer, however, that learning to sing- whether you plan to make a career of it or not – is an amazing way to discover the strength and ability of your own body and how that can be a vehicle for one’s own thoughts and creativity. Like any athlete, each singer has his/her own strengths and weaknesses; indeed, each singer is a one-of-a-kind instrument. Because of these factors, I never take a “one size fits all” approach to my teaching. Instead, I identify what each individual student needs for their instrument to become more coordinated and agile, and then develop a regimen of drills, exercises, and repertoire that target the areas where the instrument needs refinement. An added challenge to this process is that I am training muscles in others that *I cannot see*. While a football coach, for example, can easily see the muscles of his/her players at work and whether or not they are functioning properly, a voice teacher like myself must use his/her ear, as well as posture, verbal and aural cues from the student, to identify muscle disfunction and determine how to help the student improve it. None of this is possible without a rapport between the teacher and student where the student feels comfortable sharing what he/she is feeling in his/her instrument, and the teacher then translating that feedback. I believe this is one of the most crucial components of great teaching – the student must be involved in his/her own process. I do not want my students to simply do what I instruct them to do – I want them to know why they are doing it. I am a firm believer that if students “know their why,” they remember my instructions, and are also able to pass on their knowledge to others more effectively.

Aside from physical factors, a voice teacher must be very in-tune with his/her student’s personality and mindset. The voice lives in the body, as does the brain – they are inextricably connected. The voice is also hard-wired to respond to emotion; the voice teacher must adapt his/her teaching style to promote a feeling of ease with each student in order to help that student produce his/her best sound without fear. Again, the needs of each student are different – an approach that is successful with one student may be too emotionally overwhelming for another. Trusting a teacher with their voice often makes students feel incredibly vulnerable; because the voice is a part of their body, any criticism of the voice, constructive or otherwise, can be taken personally. I make it my mission to establish a relationship with my voice students where they feel safe to make mistakes and realize that constructive criticism from someone whose goal it is to help them improve their skills is crucial to learning.

It is also important to realize is that human creativity comes in many different forms. A teacher’s view of how a character should be portrayed or how a phrase should be sung may be very different from how the student sees them. I always ask the student’s opinion first so that I don’t inflict my own interpretation on them. I then guide them with suggestions that are based in historically accurate performance practice so they can see how to improve their own perceptions. I want their performances to be authentically them while being based on good vocal technique and correct interpretation precedents.

Many skills that are required to become the best singer you can be can also be applied to other areas of your life. Because we literally live in our instruments, it is susceptible to absolutely everything we do, from what we eat and what we breathe to our sleep patterns and emotional state. Breathing techniques that fine-tune the respiratory system are often also good for relieving anxiety and insomnia. Learning to stay hydrated not only helps the voice to function properly, but also helps the immune system. There are also many scientific studies on the benefits of singing on our emotional state and brain function. Teaching students in this manner not only helps them to sing well but shows them that singing can be an important part of their physical, mental, and emotional health for the rest of their lives. Indeed, it is my goal that each student, whether they are planning to sing at an amateur or professional level, take away something from my teaching that helps them to live a healthy, fulfilled life long after they leave my classroom.