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Which Is The Best Vocal "Method" to Study?

**...A unique look at the approaches, challenges
and insights of being a singing teacher.**

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Posted by [Kathy Thompson](#) on June 15, 2009
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We study singing to get better at it just as we would study any skill. We are studying this art form of SINGING in order to improve our ability and proficiency.

One of the foundations of voice work lies in the building of confidence for the student. But beyond that, we should study singing in order to acquire healthy technique when we vocalize. (Notice that I said “healthy” rather than “good”. I try to avoid words such as good or bad, because they imply judgment.)

When you sing with correct and healthy technique, you are in fact maintaining your voice for longevity and stamina, as well as optimum performance. Good technique involves understanding your instrument to some degree, and employing recommended, safe habits when it comes to warming up or working out with your voice. Long-term continued study and vocal maintenance (regular practice routine) is recommended.

Regardless of my teaching methods, constants and truths remains such as:

- Progress does not - and will not - happen instantly, overnight. As with developing any physical skill, developing one’s voice takes time without force.
- If you practice regularly, you will see results. Everyone progresses at a different rate.
- In order to create something artistic, it helps to know the rules. That’s the same with anything you want to excel at in life!

We shouldn't assume that just because you know how to use your voice to talk and have sung songs, that you know all there is to know about how to do it better.

Think of it this way:

Just because you know how to run doesn't mean that you can automatically run a marathon.

Just because you can use a sewing machine doesn't mean you can sew high fashion clothing.

Just because you can talk with your voice doesn't mean you can sing expertly.

Just because you can sing without studying doesn't mean you have the ability to sing like a seasoned professional with heavy usage demands on one's voice.

I think we can agree that someone just learning to paint can paint any old picture without knowing what they're doing or studying it. Maybe they will get lucky and it will look fine. But it's usually short-lived. Pretty soon that passionate novice painter will want to know how it all works. So they study. Great painters know all about painting and understand how the great masters created such classic, unique and timeless art. I think it's the same with singing.

What is a method?

My dictionary defines METHOD as:

A manner of procedure, esp. a systematic or clearly defined way of accomplishing an end; system or order in thought or action; the plan of procedure characteristic of discipline; logical or scientific arrangement.

A method is the way in which we do something. Most everything we do has a method of some kind. You might have your own method of stacking the dishwasher...or your own method of folding your towels. Use of a method simply implies that there is a systematic or specific way of doing something.

If a singing teacher advertises that they are certified in a particular method of teaching singing, it's possible that they will be only able to deploy only that one method when teaching voice. They may not be allowed to utilize any aids, exercises or approaches that they as a singing teacher created themselves.

I prefer not to work like that. To just use one method created by someone else would be stifling to me, no matter how popular that method is, or which masterful teacher developed it. I am the sum of my parts. All of my experiences as a singing student, actor, voice over artist and vocalist made me the performer I am today, and also the teacher I am today. I have studied voice with many singing teachers myself, taken workshops, and I was a voice major in college. I have experienced various styles of

teaching voice as a singing student myself. I have developed my own approaches on how to connect with students as individuals over the years and I customize lessons to the way in which a student will learn best.

(BTW- I myself, will continue to learn, read, research, develop, take workshops and classes for the rest of my life. We are never above learning anything new.)

Which Teaching Methods does Kathy use?

I believe that there are so many different approaches to teaching voice because there is no standard. That is a lengthy discussion which is best had elsewhere.

When I teach voice, I use mostly my own “method”. That means I use partial things from a variety of other methods, or systems of teaching voice, along with exercises, games and handouts that I created. I draw from information from all forms of media, and my own personal experience as a singer. I would work differently with someone who is very soft-spoken and shy than I would with someone who is a high-energy extrovert. There are different kinds of learners and I take that into account.

I never plagiarize anything from other singing teachers. I might take a seed of an idea I learned and tweak it, just as you would a classic food recipe. If I learn something related to singing from a science book, I will incorporate that. If I use a scale from another method such as the Seth Riggs SLS method, Frank Sinatra method, the Alan Greene workbook, or the Bel Canto method, I am sure to tell the student where that exercise came from and that they can pull on those resources. (The source is always quoted on their printed handout). I frequently tell my students about other singing courses!

If a student is doing something incorrect during singing, I can imitate it in my own voice, identify where the error is occurring during the process, and then show the student how to approach singing that one thing with more correct technique or more economical way.

Kathy’s Approach

I insist on visiting the basics at first and spend time accordingly on the usual things such as correct breathing, posture, vowel formation, etc. It’s ongoing. I devote a part of every lesson to performance.

I want you to be an original. I want to help you discover the leader within you. Every moment that we are singing a song, we are making decisions about how to sing it. The lyrics will mean something. The beat will mean something. How you phrase, deliver words, the volume or power you apply will shape the song. The vocal nuance or the boldness you choose will come into play. I think there is an actor in each of us and we

can adopt characters for our songs. How you connect with your audience whether live on stage, or from a recording booth - will matter in the end.

The main goal of lessons is not to CHANGE the inherent way your voice sounds. My goal is to take the unique sound of your voice and add to it; enhance it. We work towards uncovering and empowering the artist within you. We develop the voice you have and build upon that with a spirit of joy. You will discover new sounds.

You can't force your voice to grow or do things it can't possibly do until you have trained to do it.

(And yes, there is a difference between belting and yelling!)

To me, singing is both science and art at the same time.

I never try to change someone's natural sound. We only enhance it, help it flourish, take a holistic vocal evolutionary path and keep adding new musical layers.

At the end of every lesson, I hope that these 4 questions will be answered "yes" :

1. Did your voice get some good exercise / workout ?
2. Did you learn something interesting and new ?
3. Do you understand the assignment for next time; are there any questions ?
4. Do you feel motivated to sing and practice ?

I research. I test. In truth, science is still learning about human behaviour and how the brain works, which is paramount to the mind-body connection not only when it comes to singing or playing an instrument, but is related to learning and executing ANY physical skill. Science is still learning about the voice.

What Makes a Great Singing Teacher?

Let us pose this question to anyone who teaches a skill. For example:

- In order to be a fantastic football coach, does that person have to be a fantastic football player themselves first?
- In order to be a fantastic auto mechanic teacher, does that person have to be a fantastic auto mechanic themselves first?
- In order to be a fantastic singing teacher, does that person have to be a fantastic singer themselves?

It's my opinion that the answer to that is "yes". Ideally, at some time in their career the teacher, trainer or coach would have excelled at performing that skill themselves, which they are now teaching. If they themselves know what it's like to hit a home run on stage or in the studio, they can bring that experience to you through their coaching.

Don't be too quick to judge the style of your singing teacher. If you are a raspy rock

singer and you need to learn how to sing more healthy easy sounds during practice, you might not want to study with a person who only knows how to rock hard with their voice. You probably need warmer, richer, healthier exercises to sing; not more of the same. You need a little something in the way of therapeutic singing. Look to a variety of styles to study: R&B, folk/roots, classical, SLS, theatre, pop, etc.

Internet Misinformation About Singing Methods

There is so much misinformation on the internet, it's hard to believe what's true and what's not! Just because something is in writing doesn't mean that it is entirely accurate and absolute.

There are literally hundreds of people out there calling themselves singing teachers, vocal coaches, starting schools and calling themselves experts. Should a singing teacher have academic credentials only? A degree? Stage experience only? What credentials does someone need to be a valid singing teacher? Suppose someone has performed on Broadway stages for years but has never been in a hit musical, is not famous, and they decide to teach singing. Does that mean they won't be a good singing teacher? Maybe – maybe not. Don't be fooled by fame. Fame can be a result of luck and good networking skills. It's rare that anyone becomes famous by accident, including singing teachers. They have usually sought their station. That's not good, bad, right, or wrong – just fact. A few times, a parent has asked me if I have taught anyone famous. Would that make a difference to the quality of my teaching? Not necessarily. Keep an open mind is all I'm saying and try not to think in absolutes.

There are singing methods out there with certified coaches who are fanatical with the notion that they have the ONLY and the BEST method of teaching singing on the planet. Some attach to celebrity endorsement. Well there can be many, many amazing and valid approaches to working with people on their voices. I think that some popular methods are far too technical and the student gets hung up on the mechanics of singing. Some methods recommend things like warming up with very high quiet tones, or never talk about vocal mechanics, and assorted approaches.

Here's something that made my eyes pop wide open. I saw video of a “celebrity” voice coach working with a famous rap superstar that I found to be very disturbing. He had his female rap star actually moving her jaw sideways, quickly sweeping it back and forth, fast and hard, as a part of the vocal warm-up! You can almost guarantee TMJ medical issues from that. In fact, it could possibly warrant litigation. This NY singing coach was charging an astronomical hourly fee into three figures (but included back massage). I like to base things in fact. I have kept a log of “internet untruths” about singing. Here is just one of many, and more benign than most:

There is a website I saw which has the word ‘musician’ and ‘university’ in the name of the site. Under singing, it says, *“Singing is easy. Anyone can do it. But what most singers do not know is that your voice is just like an instrument.”*

I don’t think that’s true.

No, singing is not easy for everyone. Some people are very challenged with vocally interpreting and recreating sound as they hear it (* research the word amusia), and require different amounts of, and approaches to- ear training for accurate pitch placement. Some people are in poor physical condition and have a hard time understanding breathing, believe it or not. Some people were raised in a culture where silence was encouraged and they are ashamed to use their voice in a singing fashion. And so forth.

The human voice is the only musical instrument located within the body. It is prejudiced with emotion. A piano is not. A violin has no emotion. A guitar has no emotion. It’s the players of these instruments who can bring emotional interpretation to sound production. Our voice is within our body; the player and the instrument are one.

Furthermore, I can see all other instruments as I play them. But you cannot see your voice as you play it. You feel it. You operate this instrument of voice as your brain sends neuromuscular impulses to your voice and various other muscles and systems in the body. For fascinating information on this, I encourage you to investigate The Alexander Technique for Singers. (FYI, it’s a little technical.)

Connect with the person you want to work with. See if they make sense to you. Use your instincts and common sense when it comes to information at large. If something sounds astonishing or weird, perhaps try searching university and academic websites which are usually loaded with true and verified information.

“When we sing, let there be unconditional joy.”

... Kathy Thompson, Vocal Coach, Toronto

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Comment by [Jeannie Deva](#) on August 18, 2009 at 11:10pm

Thank you, Kathy.

Best Wishes, Jeannie Deva



Comment by [Ashique M. Fahim](#) on July 7, 2009 at 10:40pm

Very in-depth article. Well done, quite helpful for beginners like me.



Comment by [Jo Shanahan](#) on June 30, 2009 at 4:33am

Hi Kathy, you state many valid points in your article to which I concur with. A stimulating read. Thank-you.



Comment by [Georgina Hill-Brown](#) on June 29, 2009 at 2:25am

Fabulous. Thank you for taking the time to add this informative article.