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## Teaching the Child Singer: Pediatric Pedagogy for Ages 5-13

*by Dana Lentini*

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Vocal teachers have reservations about teaching children because of the controversy regarding the proper age to begin vocal instruction. While some claim that vocal training of children puts them at risk of incurring vocal injury, others believe that voice lessons at an early age are necessary to nurture young talent. In her book, *Teaching the Child Singer: Pediatric Pedagogy for Ages 5-13*, Dana Lentini, a lyric soprano, vocal pedagogue, and classroom educator, explores this controversial topic and sheds light on paediatric vocal pedagogy.

In her early career, Lentini was one of many vocal teachers who feared that children taking voice lessons at an early age might ruin their vocal development. During her time as a vocal instructor at a college and elementary school, Lentini began to question the myths surrounding teaching vocal techniques to children. After serving as a vocal instructor for students of all ages for several years, she enrolled in a master's degree in vocal pedagogy to broaden her knowledge and find pedagogical information about teaching prepubescent singers. Lentini incorporated her experience and knowledge gained from her career into creating the *five-step system*, a structured set of guidelines for teaching young children, which is the main focus of the book.

The first section of the book answers the question that readers are most likely to wonder: whether they should teach children using the same methodologies designed for adult singers. Lentini's answer is "no", since prepubertal children need to be extra cautious considering they have different pitch ranges, flexibility, loudness, and stamina. The features unique to teaching children are described throughout the section, ranging from anatomical differences, voice changes during puberty, emotional and cognitive abilities, and engaging with parents.

The five-step system, Lentini's structured teaching instruction, is explained in the second

section. The system includes the following steps for teaching vocal techniques to children: warm-ups, breathing and posture, musicianship, vocalizing, and repertoire. Each step should sound familiar to vocal pedagogues because the same process applies to adult singers. However, the book highlights various child-friendly methods and recommends against a few approaches that the author deems potentially harmful to children.

The third section breaks down the five steps into complete guidelines for three distinct age groups. For each group, the guidelines provide clear goals, exercises, and detailed teaching instructions. According to Lentini, the first group, children ages 5 to 7, is at the *discovery phase*. Children at this phase are mature enough to learn the concept of vibration of vocal folds, stable airflow, and correct posture. In addition, they can identify the different registers and understand how to express emotion. The second group, children ages 8 to 10, is at the *learning phase*. Children at this phase display the following abilities: feeling the sensation, learning basic music notation, exploring singing techniques such as regulating breath flow, singing the scale, and navigating different styles of music genres. Teachers need to closely monitor the children's progress and ensure that they balance intensity and duration and not engage in intense singing activities. The last group, children ages 11 to 13, are at the *growing phase*. Teachers' critical role for children at this phase is to help them find their unique voice and handle pubertal voice changes. Throughout this section, the author introduces plenty of exercises accompanied by straightforward instructions and intuitive pictures. The instructions are also well-structured, including descriptions of the technique, set-up, activities, and tips for every exercise. The activities are detailed enough to be applied to students immediately.

The final section introduces teaching strategies in various classroom settings. The author

presents how the five-step system can be adapted both for small group and large group classes. In the last chapter, she discusses the recent trend initiated by the COVID-19 breakout: online lessons and performance. According to Lentini, if teachers work with systematic approaches described in the book, they can conduct online lessons easily by making minor adjustments.

Overall, the book is filled with highly practical guidance and resources designed to benefit teachers of all levels of experience. Aspiring instructors unfamiliar with vocal pedagogy would find the underlying pedagogical principles illustrated throughout the book extremely valuable. Likewise, the attentive advice and practical tips for each methodology are useful for both inexperienced and experienced vocal pedagogues. The carefully curated repertoire for each age group is another shining aspect of the book. The songs are not merely listed, but the rationale for choosing each song along with advice for teaching the song is included. Finally, the resources section provides sample forms and charts for observation, assessment, and practice.

The book contains the essence of Lentini's long journey to uncover the myths surrounding vocal lessons for prepubescent singers. Lentini, who was initially sceptical of training children, is now a strong proponent of offering voice lessons for young children. However, as Lentini cautions in the book, children are not mini-adults. Teachers should keep in mind that children have unique characteristics. Therefore, they should implement teaching methodologies suitable for their students. If some teachers are still hesitant to give lessons to young children, they should not give up the opportunity for fear of ruining their students' voices. Instead, all teachers should be enthusiastic about guiding children to cultivate good vocal habits at an early age, finding their unique and beautiful voices, and allowing young souls to fully enjoy the beauty of music.

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## BIOGRAPHY

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