Train ‘em Right – Train ‘em Young by Sheri Gould

Are you in a position to influence singers? Especially young singers? Then I have some suggestions for you. Training people to sing correctly, with vocal technique that will enable them to sing for a lifetime, is like giving them a gift that will return lifelong benefits. Here are 5 of what I think are the most important skills every singer should understand and apply. The younger we can still these in our singers, the better.

#1) Teach them to understand and *USE* breath support

Breath support is understood by very few and used by even fewer. Yet, of all the potentially significant techniques one can learn as a singer, this certainly as to rank at the top. Why? Because without truly understanding breath support and applying it, a singer will necessarily invoke the use of the wrong muscles in the singing process. In order to sing–or to phonate at all– one needs to use SOME musculature. A singer will either choose the right muscles or the wrong ones. If a singer doesn’t know the difference he or she may very well default to using the wrong muscles. Even singers who understand breath support often don’t use it. It’s not enough to see your students using proper breath support during vocalises, watch them for support when they are *actually singing*. Often there is quite a discrepancy between the two. This may be tied in closely with the way the singer speaks as well. This brings me to the second most important thing…

#2) Teach them to SPEAK correctly

The trick here may be to make sure that YOU speak correctly. Speaking correctly involves the same processes as singing correctly; breath support, correct tone placement, relaxation, etc. Most of the time where there is a vocal/singing problem it can be traced directly back to an improper speech technique. Yet this extremely important aspect is often overlooked during the vocal training process. Even though I am not a speech pathologist, I spend a great deal of my time trying to teach people how to speak properly. I wish that EVERY singer would spend some time with a speech therapist and learn the basics of this crucial technique. This is why some clinics are now starting to join forces to incorporate singing and speech training under the same roof—like the Cleveland Clinic Voice Center–offering total care for the singer– (visit www.clevelandclinic.org/voicetreatment for a free Voice Treatment Guide). I so appreciate the mindset they have that incorporates the total (vocal) instrument and its uses.

Make sure that you acquaint yourself with and practice healthy speech habits so that you can model for and also quickly diagnose speech issues in your singers. The younger they are the easier this may be to fix—but even an old singer can learn new behaviors. Then follow up on a regular basis to make sure they have not grown slack in their care. There needs to be a lifetime commitment to healthy speech patterns.

#3) Teach them how to RELAX the neck muscles and lower their larynx

_Understanding how to keep the muscles in the neck relaxed will help force students to use better breath support by taking away other means of supporting their tone. Additionally, it will help to keep them vocally healthy by eliminating unnecessary stress to the vocal folds. One of the key factors in staying relaxed, vocally is to keep the larynx in a low (neutral) position. This is typically only accomplished through training. The untrained singer is not likely to even be aware of the position of his or her larynx. When the larynx is high, much stress is added to the vocal folds and surrounding neck muscles often resulting is soreness after singing. The sooner the singer is made aware and taught to control the larynx the better, A positive muscle memory can be established and good habits can be put in place early on.

#4) Teach them to be discerning about who they imitate

Recently, there have been a number of videos "leaked" showing artists singing with all the band members stripped out of the mix and all effects lifted. Some have been unfair in their depictions of the singer's actual ability and others have been quite telling. For example, there were several clips of Karen Carpenter in the studio—voice only—and she was incredible. Many other singers however, proved that without all the glitz, effects, auto tune, etc, they have very little real talent or substantial vocal finesse.

It is easy to admire the music of a particular artist without recognizing that, as a vocalist, they may not have good technique. I'm not referring to style. I'm talking about making sure that, whatever style is sung, it is sung in a way as to keep the singer singing for a lifetime. So many popular singers have ruined their voices over time and are no longer fit for live performance. This does not mean that their music or style necessarily was flawed; it simply means that they damaged their voice over time (for any number of reasons) during delivery. It is important to make sure that when you are training (especially when working with young) singers, you emphasize the need to be discerning about healthy vocal practices. Make sure you take time to find out who they listen to and perhaps spend some time together critiquing the vocal techniques of those artists. Invariably, if your student enjoys listening to a particular artist, they will likely end up imitating them. Try to encourage them to step out of their boxes and listen to other types of music with singers who may be older and time tested. It may make you sound a bit old fashioned, but emphasize that older artists who are still singing with healthy voices have learned and applied good teaching/technique. It's important that your student does not confuse developing style with good vocal technique as if they are juxtaposed. They can be accomplished together!

#5) Teach you students about vocal health

Last but definitely not least, make sure your students gain a thorough knowledge of how to keep their instrument healthy. There are so many important aspects to vocal health; hydration, proper rest, understanding the importance of warming up, etc… Establishing healthy vocal habits from an early age on can help to set the stage for a wonderful, full lifetime of singing.

God bless you as you strive to serve Him through helping and training others!