

Perspectives

Everyone Wants to Sing

By Jeffrey Steele

Everyone wants to sing. While many make excuses (“You don’t want to hear my voice” etc.), I believe that everyone not actively involved in singing wishes to become so. It is inherently human to seek expression through the singing voice, the one instrument none of us need to purchase.

While playing classical guitar has many rewards, it is generally an insular experience. So is guitar teaching. When I moved from Boston to Turners Falls, in 1990, I had to give up many guitar students, only to find that such a clientèle was difficult to duplicate in Massachusetts’ poorest county. Thus I began teaching elementary school music, and found new joy and community through singing with children. I approached the task as a Pete-Seeger-style troubadour, inspiring enthusiasm but not aspiring to a truly choral sound. To be honest, I had not progressed enough in my own vocal training to support genuine vocal training of my students.

Living north of Boston this past decade, I have found myself on-and-off in K-8 classrooms. It was not until being hired by the Metropolitan Opera Guild as an “Urban Voices Choral Director,” however, did I realize that however fun community singing can be, people’s enjoyment of their own voice depends on their learning to use it properly. We Urban Voices teachers are a network of free-lancers placed in (mostly public) schools, many of the latter having lost their regular music teacher due to budget cuts. We are not meant to take the place of such teachers but, rather, work with the homeroom teacher in developing a successful classroom singing routine that both relates to curricular topics and prepares children for life-long participation in choral singing. We have professional development meetings with our area coordinator to learn skills and exchange ideas amongst ourselves. The homeroom teachers we work with are also prepared by a workshop with our program coordinator.

While tooling up for my next U.V. placement (Fridays in Lynn), I decided it was time to revive my own vocal studies and struck up a barter with a professional vocalist — who just so happens to be the mother of one of my guitar students. The progress I have made with her directly enhances my work with the children in Lynn, filling me with a new sense of mission. While the MOG does not offer benefits, the choral experience participating teachers get can lead to a job that does. (Just try finding a guitar teaching job with benefits!) We each have a unique voice; never underestimate the satisfaction yours can bring you!

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