

CLASSIFICATION OF THE SINGING VOICE



The American Academy of Teachers of Singing, realizing that the correct classification of a student's voice is one of the most important responsibilities of a teacher of singing, believes that a statement of the principles and procedures pertaining to Voice Classification may be of service to the profession.

It is recognized, as an accepted fact, that no absolute, infallible test can be established in this important matter and that the decision in each individual case regarding the type of voice must depend on the wisdom, judgment and experience of the teacher, and can only be made by the teacher.

Nevertheless, the many examples of incorrect voice classification encountered indicate a need for a survey of the subject, and this paper is offered in the belief that it may be of service to teachers and to students of singing alike.

1. THE KIND OF VOICE POSSESSED BY ANY INDIVIDUAL IS A GIFT OF NATURE AND ITS BASIC POTENTIAL CANNOT BE ALTERED.

There are many well-known examples of singers starting their careers in one voice classification and successfully changing to another. In such cases it is believed that the true potential of the voice emerged only after considerable training and experience in its use. The process was one of finding the true class of the voice, not an alteration of its basic type.

2. THE KIND OF VOICE POSSESSED BY ANY INDIVIDUAL IS DETERMINED BY THE SIZE AND PROPORTIONS OF THE VOCAL MECHANISM.

The vocal instrument is a living one, developing as the individual develops and matures. Therefore, within the pattern established by inheritance, a constant growth and development of the voice should be expected if the voice is being trained in correct vocalization. This, however, is a change *within* the bounds of the true potential, not a change *of* it.

The age, maturity, vocal technique and singing experience of the student should be carefully considered, therefore, in deciding his or her type of voice. No voice teacher can dictate the future development of a voice. He can only aid it. The essential timbre of the voice, once it has emerged, should never be violated.

The Academy does not believe that a decision as to the type of a voice can be based on visual evidence.

No two voices, even within the same class, will be identical, just as no two persons finger-prints are identical. This variety within each class is probably the reason for the many sub-classifications of voice employed by teachers and singers.

3. IT IS NOT ESSENTIAL THAT THE TEACHER MAKE A CLASSIFICATION OF A VOICE AT A FIRST HEARING.

In some voices, especially those of young beginners, the type of voice is not indicated at the start of study. In such cases it is wiser not to make a final classification of the voice until sufficient training has unmistakably revealed it.

A temporary classification may be made and future probabilities noted in such cases, but it is advisable to avoid fixing in the mind of the student any particular voice type because the emergence of the true potential may be retarded thereby.

The first decision of the teacher should be whether the voice is properly used and whether the trend is high or low. Classification of the voice is not the essential consideration in the very early lessons. It is more important to develop the foundation required by the voice to produce a unified scale throughout the complete range. All faults in production must be corrected before a consideration of voice quality, range or any other factor can be of value in safely classifying voices.

Poor musicianship can be an inhibiting factor. Anxieties attendant upon musical uncertainty have a strongly limiting effect upon free use of the voice.

4. VOCAL RANGE ALONE IS A MOST UNRELIABLE AND DECEIVING FACTOR IN DETERMINING VOICE TYPE.

Many young voices have great flexibility and can produce tones in the extremes of range. This fact can lead to mis-classification. Range is an important factor to be considered, but must be evaluated in relation to voice quality and other vocal characteristics.

Many high baritones can sing a brilliant high A or B flat, but would be unable for long to sustain songs of a tenor tessitura. Many sopranos have a good low range and in choruses often are put in the alto section, especially if they read music well. However, the ability to produce tones of low pitch does not necessarily make them contraltos, and real harm can be done to a soprano voice if it is kept too long and exclusively in the low portion of the range. The continued employment of tones in the upper range alone can be equally harmful.

The preference of a student, sometimes unreasonable, should not influence the teacher in his decision as to the type of the student's voice.

The speaking voice of a student may or may not indicate the true type of the singing voice. Poor speech habits can obscure the potential voice type. Therefore the teacher should use great discretion in evaluating evidence from this source.

5. THE TESSITURA THAT THE DEVELOPED, TRAINED VOICE IS CAPABLE OF MAINTAINING SUCCESSFULLY IS AN EXCELLENT, FINAL TEST OF PROPER VOICE CLASSIFICATION.

Obviously, this test can be made only after a sufficient period of study, which, naturally, will vary with the individual. It is especially useful however in border-line voices, where doubt may exist as to whether a singer is a mezzo or a dramatic soprano; or a high baritone or a dramatic tenor.

6. VIRTUOSO VOICES CAN PERFORM EXTREME FEATS.

The experienced teacher, however, even with voices of this kind, will exercise wisdom and judgment in the choice of vocalises and song material.

Young singers also need guidance sometimes in the matter of acceptance of singing engagements, avoiding if possible those unsuited to their type of voice and those demanding a degree of maturity not yet reached.

7. CORRECT VOICE CLASSIFICATION IS PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT WHEN ASSIGNING YOUNG SINGERS TO THE VOICE PARTS IN A CHORUS.

When the class of a singer's voice is not clearly defined, or where there is a question as to which of two sections of a chorus should be chosen, it is generally better to put the singer in the lower rather than the higher of two possible parts in order to avoid voice strain, always with the understanding that such assignment is tentative and subject to change as the voice develops and its true potential emerges.

Especially in the case of young singers of college and high school age, there may be a marked development and consequent change during these formative years. A choral director having such voices in his charge should hear every member of his chorus, individually, at least twice a year, and be ready to shift the singer from one part to another as the voice develops in one direction or the other. In the case of the changing voice during adolescence, exceptional care and thought on the part of the experienced teacher or choral director is vital and necessary to determine as to whether or not a vocal routine should be carried on during that period, and if so what it should be. In this field there are conflicting opinions among the leading authorities as to the best procedure.