

# WHEN IS A CHILD READY FOR VOICE LESSONS?

BY WENDY L. HELLYER



Throughout the year singing teachers receive calls from eager parents who wish to start their children in voice lessons. Others inspired by tales of child genius Mozart, a rerun of a Shirley Temple movie or televised talents show are anxious to begin developing their children's singing talents as early as possible. The question arises, "At what age should I begin voice lessons for my child?"

Teachers with degrees in voice and/or opera or who have studied professionally agree that most children should not begin serious vocal training until the age of 14! This often shocks both parents and children.

Over the last three years the trend in education has been to expose young children to as many opportunities for learning at as early an age as possible. In the music field this has led to such things as Suzuki Violin, Suzuki Piano and Kindermusik - all of which are designed to expose pre-school children to the joys and basic elements of music. (All of which we offer at our school.)

Voice, however, is entirely different from other forms of musical study. In singing, the human body is the instrument and the instructor has to take into consideration not just the intellectual development, dexterity of the child and their musical altitude, but also their

physiological development.

Just as toe shoes may be harmful to the developing foot, or bench pressing heavy weights would damage muscles and ligaments instead of building strength in a young body, encouraging a young child to "push" their voice can damage the pre-adolescent vocal cords.

Good voice teachers who care about the child's long term development and career will wait until the child is approximately 14, or about 2-3 years from puberty. This is to allow the hormone changes to take place and the body (including the vocal cords) to develop and strengthen. The exceptions to this are in the cases of vocal groups such as the Vienna Boys Choir or Westminster Boys Choir where the children are allowed to sing in their natural, light child voices. Even Shirley Temple did not "belt" a song. She sang as a child. There was no pushing of her voice.



## TEACHER'S QUALIFICATION

There is a distinct difference between someone whose main skill and training is in playing the piano and one who is trained and experienced in singing and teaching voice. While there is no licensing of voice teachers it is always best

to ask the perspective teacher about credentials - both their performing and educational background to determine their qualifications to teach voice. A degree in general music or being a terrific pianist is not the same as specializing in vocal pedagogy.

## ALTERNATIVES FOR THE PRE-ADOLESCENT

Prior to adolescent (about age 14) the best training for children is to provide them with instrumental training. Then when the child is old enough for voice lessons they already have developed their musicianship skills-reading, writing and playing music.

For a child of any age the best way to determine the child's readiness or aptitude for music is to have a professional and ethical teacher evaluate their skills and discuss the time commitment and skills required by both the child and the parents. This will help ensure that at whatever age the child begins, his or her lessons will be productive and a satisfying part of their overall development.

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