

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

“Great teachers inspire their students into speech,” said my mentor Mother Linda Johnson in a recent discussion. I was dumbfounded and inspired by this simple utterance, because I believed it to most succinctly describe my philosophy of teaching. Truly effective teachers empower students with knowledge to teach themselves, and the wherewithal to stand up and have something to say. The beauty of being a classical vocal educator is that my subject matter is so deeply connected to selfhood and the spoken word. Growing up around mostly gospel and R&B music, I was exposed to classical music late in high school. Classical singing was a foreign concept until freshman year of college. What attracted me to this field was the mysterious and spiritual power of vocal music, my appreciation for learning new languages and cultures, an intellectual interest in science, and my passion for teaching. My philosophy as a pedagogue is grounded in four guiding principles: science-informed pedagogy, body awareness, cultural understanding and appreciation, and the place of vocal artistry as storytelling.

The core of my pedagogical framework is an understanding of vocal function from a physiological and acoustical perspective. My training at Westminster Choir College and my work in the Voice Lab showed me how important this aspect is. Knowing how the voice works on a functional level allows me to teach a variety of students. For example, while working at Stafford Music Academy and attending Indiana University I worked with mostly elementary and secondary school girls. My awareness of life-span vocal development afforded me the knowledge that prepubescent girls have breathier voices because of an unclosed glottal chink. This physiological issue was mostly unavoidable, and allowed me to focus our study with age-appropriate repertoire with a limited vocal range, and exercises focused on breath flow, posture, and a balanced phonatory mechanism. My knowledge of formant tuning in men as expressed in my 2014 study helped me to find creative ways to work with my private student who works as a musician in the Ambient music genre. I was able to help this student create interesting vocal effects without harming his voice with strained, tight vocal fold vibration. Science is not singing though, and these ideas must be brought into unity with body awareness and the emotions.

While serving as an Associate Instructor of voice in the Jacobs School of Music, I required my students to complete comprehensive translation sheets for their foreign language songs. In having to create a colloquial translation, the students brought their personality to each song. This assignment required students to investigate how they could emotionally connect to subject matter that may seem unrelated to their lives—this skill is connected to empathy and a deeper sense of self. To connect students to their bodies, I incorporated yoga postures and Alexander Technique visualizations to free up bodily tensions, and to encourage mental focus. I agree with Thomas Hemsley, who believed that the voice was directly connected to emotions. Though my knowledge of voice science allows me efficiently address vocal function issues, I admit that the student must simplify complicated physiological actions into sensations connected to emotion. The gateway to this is body awareness, and a deep understanding of the texts

being sung. A free body and mind open the doorway to true artistry. Vocal function becomes singing when science meets inspiration and honest expression.

Through my private teaching and student affairs responsibilities I have come in contact with students from all around the world. Growing up in a small town, I came to appreciate the beauty of diversity when I moved to Louisville, KY from Marion, IN. Serving as a tutor in diction at Westminster Choir College, I tutored a talented pianist from China in English diction and comprehension. I was so inspired by his work ethic, and his genuine interest in learning the complexities of the English language. My understanding of Chinese language habits came in handy while teaching voice lessons to a beginning Chinese student as an Associate Instructor at IU. I was able to address her diction problems proactively, and was able to have a more advanced Chinese pianist and singer serve as her accompanist. My understanding of my limitations, as well as my familiarity with Chinese culture told me that having a Chinese female accompanist in the room would put my student in a more comfortable position to work on English diction. In addition, my positionality as a black male in higher education allows me to serve as an ambassador to other black students who are so woefully lacking in our schools of music. The importance of historical and cultural understanding cannot be emphasized enough, especially when relating to students. When a student feels understood and their culture is valued by their teacher, it makes teaching much more engaging for both teacher and student.

“Scotch and soda! Mud in your eye!” sang my first voice student during teaching practicum at Westminster Choir College. She was in her late 50s, and I had asked her to bring a familiar song to sing for our first lesson. I had never heard this song, and she was shouting more than she was singing. Though this was certainly not the best singing I had ever heard, it was perhaps the most impassioned and sincere performance I had ever seen. Apparently, “Scotch and Soda” was a popular drinking song when she was in her 20s. As much vocal work as we had to do over the semester, I will never forget the student’s story of singing. She had last sung publicly as Dorothy in her high school’s production of *Wizard of Oz*, and was completely convinced that she was a lost cause. I praised this student for her enthusiasm, diction, and spirit. By the end of the semester, her breathing and phonation had improved drastically. More importantly, though, she was still a sincere storyteller. Though this student did not have the most attractive voice, her personality and zest for life were infectious. I recount this story, because I cannot express a teaching philosophy without acknowledging that all singers have a story to tell. It is the duty and privilege of voice teachers to help them find their story, and express it through the medium of singing. I am grateful to be called to such an important profession for today’s culture, and look forward to building upon my foundational philosophy with the help of my students, colleagues, and mentors.