

# JEREMY GUSSIN

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## TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

Collaborative learning has been part of my process for almost as long as I can remember. In truth this process was first modeled to me by my father through his frequent hosting of department gatherings where no topic went unturned through spirited discussion and third helpings of Boule de Neige – witnessing the ability to engage in true dialogue with others led my constant desire to create and experience art *with* others; through arrangements, small vocal ensembles, collaborative piano work, and choral and individual voice teaching, I thrive through interaction as my peers and students tackle a field so intimately tied to human experience. As an educator, I need to be able to create an environment for students to engage in learning, encourage self-reflection and critical thinking, and modify instruction based on the individual and the changing world we live in.

It is paramount as a teacher to be able create an environment that encourages trust, positive interaction, active engagement in learning, and self-motivation from each individual, whether that environment is one of one-on-one teaching, or in a classroom. A singer's voice is an incredibly personal instrument which has already been developed as the primary communicator of a person's thoughts, emotions, questions and more over the course of their entire life. Because of this, it is crucial to understand that even the most well-intentioned course of action in identifying or fixing vocal faults could be seen as an attack on their sense of belonging or as an intrusion into a very private part of their identity. In addition to this, the process of healthy, unobstructed phonation is linked to physical changes throughout the body; the daily change in bodily health and how it might appear in vocal issues must also be taken into account when creating a comfortable atmosphere. One of my greatest challenges as young educator was teaching a young man both individually and in two choral ensembles for a semester. He was a fine musician, but would have a tendency to shut down when he felt a musical suggestion or critique of his performance was unjustified. He had a tendency as well as create a lot of subglottic pressure by contracting his abdominal muscles while attempting to sing frequently at a loud dynamic to show his worth as a contributing male voice in the mixed choral ensemble. It became apparent that my work with this student would be critical to his sense of belonging within the ensembles, and that finding a way to negate or calm his reactions would also provide a much more stable environment for all students involved in the collaborative choral process. By providing low, rubato solo material, light sustained falsetto exercises in men's chorus, and providing supervised music tutoring opportunities, the young man's development of more lyrical musicianship, sense of self-worth, and greater ease of vocalism contributed to a decrease of outbursts and a more welcoming choral environment for his peers.

The process of self-reflection is critical to the individual growth of my students and the evolution of my teaching as well. One of my primary duties as a teacher of voice is to recognize that a well-structured lesson can still only provide motivation and tools for a student to apply in their practice, of which they will receive little to no direct feedback from me during the week. It is therefore crucial to not only provide students instruction on how to approach fixing issues in their mechanism and creative process, but also how to become

aware of certain tendencies or when an old habit sneaks back after weeks of work. One of the tools I like to provide my students with is something we refer to as “honesty” in which one cups each hand (palm facing backwards, fingers facing the ceiling) in front of the ears to isolate a singer’s voice in the room. Because this practice seeks to draw focus away from listening through conduction of one’s bone and soft tissue, students are often surprised that the sound they believed was operatic and full was only being heard in their head, not by the masses! Even as a student continues to approach more technically challenging music and performance skills, these honest hands can be used to hear intricate changes in placement, smooth dynamics, and more. In the process of teaching, it is important to be aware of both verbal and non-verbal cues being presented by students in any situation. Creating an environment where I make it clear I want to learn and continue my development as an instructor is a humbling and challenging commitment. One thing I like to include in my teaching is the use of humor, as I find it typically allows for greater relaxation from the student and myself. Should I become aware that one of my teaching strategies was not working for a particular student, or if someone has become stressed or uncomfortable in the classroom, I frequently move towards the use of anecdotal, informal learning strategies to relieve tension in the room and focus on broader musical ideas or lessons in life. Having picked up this tool from several gifted humorists in the past, I also realize that it is important to go back in self-reflection and identify what hadn’t worked, and make sure to show the students you are aware and care about their education as you formulate different and diverse new approaches in teaching.

In this changing and diversifying world, it is my duty as an educator to modify my instruction based on the individual student. In the area of applied voice instruction not only does this mean having the versatility to adjust my teaching (for example to what degree I use visual, kinesthetic, and voiced scientific exercises to approach a vocal issue) based on the strengths of an individual’s learning style, but it also means recognizing some of the strengths or hurdles students of different backgrounds may be coming in with, regardless to whether or not they have a direct relation to vocal production. A pursuit of a music degree can help develop crucial communicative and analytical skills in addition to a greater sense of the human experience – these attributes can be used for a great variety of jobs both within and outside the music field, and it would be detrimental to work against a student interest or strength by not allowing some flexibility in the genres of music I assign (or be willing to coach), or to not actively encourage interdisciplinary activity.

Teaching is an ever-evolving process which constantly requires one to be flexible in all areas of life. Teaching is a very intimate process, as human interaction and the development and strengthening of skills and community ties encourages students and teachers alike to be themselves and be supportive of their individuality and sense of self. I teach music because I understand that the world is in need of people in touch with the intricacies of the human condition, and that the tools musicians develop can truly be used to improve the betterment of a vast number of members of this society.