

## **“CHOICE FOR VOICE 2010”: Kim Chandler**

“SO YOU WANT TO BE A VOCAL COACH?”: A multi-disciplinary perspective on teaching singing

This paper will outline and discuss the key areas that the author believes effective singing coaches with a multi-disciplinary approach should have at least a working knowledge of:

- **Music Education:**
  - Music History: knowledge of the history of Western music in general for context, and a more detailed history of any specific genre or genres that the teacher may specialize in.
  - Music Theory: a high level of understanding and training in music theory is mandatory, especially in the style of music taught, e.g. classical theory for classical singers and jazz/pop theory for jazz/pop singers. Knowledge of keys is particularly useful.
  - Music Reading: the ability to read music is essential in certain styles, e.g. classical singing, musical theatre, but still advisable for contemporary singers.
  - Musical Styles: awareness of the fundamental differences between various styles of singing, and a detailed understanding of the stylistic requirements of those taught.
  - Ear Training: a high level of aural discrimination is necessary to be able to identify and remedy various musical issues, e.g. timing and pitching issues, which may occur.
  - Repertoire: detailed knowledge of the breadth of the type of repertoire taught is fundamental, in addition to awareness of song form and compositional devices etc.
  - Accompaniment skills: at least a competent level of proficiency on a chordal instrument is advisable for leading vocal exercises and for accompanying purposes. Traditionally the piano is used, but the guitar may be just as effective in this role.
  
- **Effective teaching:**
  - Skill Acquisition Theories: awareness of how people acquire skills (perceptual, cognitive and motor) is useful background knowledge to the learning process.
  - Lesson/course planning: effective private teachers know how to structure a lesson well with clear & appropriate objectives outlined and addressed. In group teaching, a program of work is often necessary.
  - Effective Communication: teachers need to be excellent communicators and a positive source of inspiration to their students – this is a hallmark sign of good teaching practice.
  - Time Management: adhering to best practice in this regard in one’s own teaching, and also knowing how to pass on time management skills to students/clients
  - Diagnostic skill: the ability to accurately discern technical faults and have quick-working, effective solutions – this is the culmination of one’s knowledge base to date.
  - Singing Teaching Methodologies: intimate knowledge of a particular methodology is self-evident for practitioners of a particular methodology, e.g. EVTS, CVT, SLS etc - what

this author calls vocal 'maps'. However, it would also be beneficial for independent teachers to be aware of the main ideas contained within the various methodologies on offer in the marketplace for the purposes of understanding the variety of approaches in with the wider vocal community.

- Learning Styles: a teacher's clientele is comprised of various different types of learners who can be categorized and catered for according to various theories, e.g. 'VARK' (Neil Fleming), 'Multiple Intelligences' (Howard Gardner), David Kolb's 'Learning Styles Inventory' (LSI) with Honey & Mumford's variant 'Learning Style Questionnaire' (LSQ) etc.
- Learning Disabilities: one's clientele may contain people who are suffering from a learning disability (SpLD) that needs to be taken into account during the teaching/learning process, e.g. Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, ADD, ADHD etc.
- Personality Disorders: one's clientele may also contain people who are suffering from a personality disorder which can potentially complicate the teaching/learning process, e.g. OCD, Borderline personality disorder, anorexia, bulimia, or negative effects from sexual abuse, drug/substance abuse etc.
- Technology: knowledge of how to use the requisite technology in lessons, e.g. computers, CD players, iPods, memory sticks, sound systems, keyboards, mics, Skype video , video cameras etc
- **Performance Skills**:
  - Biomechanical/ergonomic efficiency: in order to sing & move effortlessly and with maximum efficiency. This can be assisted by methods such as Alexander technique, Feldenkrais etc
  - Warm-ups/downs: body release and vocal release exercises that lead to an optimized vocal state of readiness to rehearse, practice or perform with the corresponding calming set of vocal exercises to help bring the voice back to a normal state again after exertion.
  - Practice Routines: advice on effective practice strategies – how, where, when, how often, how much, what to practice etc maximizes practice time.
  - 'Peak Performance' strategies: advice from the arena of sports medicine has a lot to offer performers of all types.
  - Performance Anxiety Strategies: deep breathing, visualization techniques, NLP, EMDR etc.
  - Visual performance: provision of guidelines regarding the visual side of performing, e.g. mic technique (including basic PA orientation and how to sound check effectively), stagecraft, gestures, facial expressions, movement, command of stage space etc.

- Industry Knowledge: in order to give meaningful and accurate careers advice one needs to stay abreast of current trends within the particular area of the music industry that one's clientele hails from.
  
- **Medical Issues**:
  - Vocal Health/Hygiene advice: Knowledge of accurate vocal health advice should be passed onto all students/clients as routine procedure.
  - Relevant Anatomy & Physiology: at least a basic knowledge of vocal anatomy and vocal function is a fundamental underpinning of understanding the singing process. Some endoscopic orientation & basic interpretation would also be beneficial.
  - Neurological implications for singing: an appreciation of how the right brain (creative, emotive) and left brain (patterns, language) interact in the singing process, in addition to which areas of the brain are involved in language acquisition and musical learning. Reflexive, emotive, 'primal' sounds and their relationship to singing.
  - Vocal Conditions/Pathologies: at least a basic knowledge of various medical conditions which can affect singers, e.g. reflux, cysts, sulcus, polyps, muscle tension dysphonia (MTD), nodules, granuloma, respiratory conditions, bruxism, TMJ, chronic sinus problems, hay fever etc, and the related treatment modalities is advisable.
  - Medications and their effects: at least a basic knowledge of common medications and their possible affects on singers, e.g. aspirin, antihistamines, cortisone etc is advisable.
  - Voice specialists/therapists: at least a basic knowledge of what the various specialists and therapists who work with singers with medical conditions offer, e.g. ENT, SLT, Physiotherapy, Osteopathy etc, and knowledge of who the 'singer-friendly' practitioners are in one's geographical area is useful.
  - Medical Referral System: it is advisable that singing teachers know the workings of their particular medical system in reference to the medical referral system in order to advise their students.
  - Hearing Protection & Health: aural health must not be overlooked, particularly for those singers who routinely sing in loud, amplified environments or even opera singers practicing in a small, sound reflective practice room.
  
- **Acoustic Science**:
  - Aerodynamic/Myoelastic properties of the vocal folds: e.g. 'Bernoulli Effect' etc
  - Spectographic analysis: being familiar with what spectrograms look like and how to interpret them at least in a basic form could be advantageous for use as biofeedback in a teaching situation and also for interpretation of voice research.
  - Frequencies (Hz): knowledge of hertz and how it relates to sung pitch.

- Harmonics (F0): ratios of the fundamental. Also, partials and overtones and the implications for resonance in the singing voice.
  - Formants: acoustic properties (both boosts and cuts) based on the shape & size of the vocal tract as a resonator.
  - Sound Pressure Level: or volume, measured in decibels (db), and its implications for singing.
  - Phonetic symbols: at least a basic knowledge of phonetic symbols making the interpretation of voice research more accessible.
- **Legal/Ethical Issues**:
    - Professional ethics: knowing what is expected of a professional and adhering to an appropriate ethical code of behaviour.
    - Confidentiality: teachers can become privy to confidential information and this must be dealt with sensitively and appropriately.
    - 'Duty of Care': when dealing with minors or vulnerable adults awareness of this responsibility is critical. A criminal background check ('CRB') may also be required.
    - Insurance: e.g. Public Liability Insurance, Professional Indemnity etc.

Although not intended to be exhaustive, the above points will be presented as an ever-expanding 'mind map' in order to outline the breadth of knowledge and skills which the author believes is advisable for vocal coaches to be in possession of in order to be fully equipped to fulfill the specialized remit of effective vocal coaching in today's market.

Any of these areas can be updated and expanded upon as part of a commitment to lifelong learning. However, it is important that multi-disciplinary boundaries of expertise should remain adhered to, but cross-pollination of ideas resulting from dialogue within the various vocal specialisms can only enrich all those involved in voice care and development.

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