

Bonnie Pomfret answers Frequently Asked Questions

People say I have talent. What does that mean?

“Talent” may mean different things to different people. It may mean that you have a pleasing voice quality, a loud voice, an ability to imitate famous singers, or that they need your voice type in their choir or show, or that your voice reminds them of a famous singer, or many other things.

However, if you are told you have talent, you should get some voice instruction and explore your potential.

Why study voice formally?

Singing combines both physical and artistic elements. At the very minimum, you need to know how your instrument works: what your range is, how to breathe, etc.. If it is functioning correctly, your voice should remain essentially the same in quality as long as you have your health. The successful “untrained singer” is a romantic notion, promoted heavily by reality shows and popular media. In real life, very few untrained singers are able to use their voices effectively for very long. They burn out their voices when demands are great or they are stressed. Then they suffer injury and vocal decline. In contrast, singers who have good technique sing their entire lives. Even though technology is used to alter many aspects of current artists, they need to be able to sing to go on tour.

Beyond the simply physical aspects of singing, there are many artistic and musical aspects of singing, including musicianship, phrasing, diction (pronunciation) dynamics, and expression; a good teacher can help you to advance to your highest potential more quickly and introduce you to new repertoire and new musical concepts.

At what age should you start to take voice lessons? Traditionally, students have been warned off from lessons before puberty, because the physical instrument is still developing. As a teacher, I know that if a child wants to sing, they will sing, and it is important to develop good habits. In recent years, due perhaps to the popularity of reality shows, younger and younger students ask for voice lessons. Let the buyer beware! Before high school, voice lessons should focus on the tasks that the younger singer is able to perform: light singing with good breath support, singing in tune, learning to read music, and being exposed to a number of different styles of music.

Do I need to read music?

Although there are some famous individuals who have made careers without reading music, they are the exception. Anyone considering the serious pursuit of music needs to be able to read music off the page. Quite a few of the most famous popular musicians started out with classical training, though they do not emphasize this when giving interviews.

Keyboard skills are invaluable to any singer. Good musicianship, the command of all aspects of a musical performance, is essential. Community music schools and college extension divisions usually offer theory or musicianship classes and piano lessons. Some voice teachers also teach music theory and musicianship.

How much do I have to practice?

As in sports, singing requires coordination of muscles. Because in singers these muscles are largely invisible and the coordination is very refined, we sometimes underestimate their importance. Understanding how to do something is not enough; the body learns by repetition. Just as a sports team practices every day, so a musician needs to practice every day. No other way has been found to excel in music! The more complex the task, or the more difficult the music, and of course the more music you are preparing for performance, the more practice is necessary.

What does it take to become a professional singer?

The answer to this question differs greatly, depending on the type of music you want to sing. In popular music, image and message are far more important than voice quality or education in music. For the Broadway stage, acting, dancing, and quality of voice play important parts; most performers have a degree in one of these areas and extensive study in the others, or a musical theater degree. In classical singing, including opera, church music, oratorio, recital, and chamber music, quality of voice, musicianship, ability to sing in foreign languages, and interpretive skills are important. Most classical singers have at least a master's degree.

For any of these career paths, you will need to train all the skills needed, and this means much more than voice lessons. No matter what type of music you want to sing, you need to be able to devote money, time, and energy to building a career. You will need emotional and financial support. And, at least a little bit of good luck is very helpful!

What is the McClosky technique?

As a result of his own mid-career health and vocal crisis, David Blair McClosky combined several elements of voice technique into a unique and simple system of voice production.

Postural alignment and “appoggio” breathing are the foundation of this approach. The second element is the relaxation of muscle groups of the face and throat, which are primarily responsible for chewing and swallowing, but which when overactive, can hamper voice production.

These exercises are used to enhance sound production, both in healthy singers and speakers and those with voice disorders. They create a foundation for all voice use, in a simple form that is based in anatomy and physiologically efficient. In my own training, the McClosky technique gave me a voice that would be professional in caliber, when what I naturally had was a good amateur voice. I believe that good voice production is independent of style and usage: the same principles apply to speech and singing, whether in the classical or popular idiom. I also believe that in fields which require a lot of speaking, such as politics, sales, or the legal profession, health “vocal image” can be very important and are virtually ignored. In addition to singing lessons, I offer workshops that help to train individuals' voices to perform well in all capacities relating to speech.

What is the difference between a “voice coach” and a “voice teacher”?

A voice coach is usually someone who helps singers prepare music, including notes and rhythms, phrasing, expression, diction, and style. A coach is usually primarily a pianist, and has usually completed a degree in collaborative piano or conducting. A voice teacher is someone who guides the singer in building and improving the voice, its quality, and vocal technique. Most voice teachers also coach music, but very few voice coaches teach voice.

How do you find a good voice teacher?

Voice teaching is unregulated in the United States; there is no license, certification, or other legal qualification to become a voice teacher. The National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS) has about 6000 teaching members who all have at least a degree in vocal music (usually vocal performance) and who subscribe to the NATS Code of Ethics. At their website www.nats.org, you can search for a teacher in your area.

Beyond this, it is often difficult to find a teacher who really can help you with your unique individual concerns. Word of mouth is probably the best recommendation. Beware the teacher whose students all sound alike! You should try to develop your own unique sound. Think of a singer you love to hear - couldn't you tell that voice anywhere? It is important to find a teacher who not only is or was a good singer, but one who understands the many challenges of different singers, and who can work in a supportive way to unlock each singer's individual potential. My own teachers were all above age 70 when I studied with them, and had decades of teaching and performing experience.