

Catherine Compton
Philosophy of Teaching Statement

As an educator and musician, my goal is to empower students to seek artistic excellence, truth, and joy in their careers and lives. The human voice is remarkable in both its strength to fill a giant concert hall without amplification and its ability to communicate the most intimate and vulnerable of human emotions. I strive to help singers develop the knowledge, self-confidence, and sustainability to fully realize the richness of their vocal artistry. Often singers must draw upon their own creativity to be fulfilled in performing and exploring new platforms and ideas. My hope is to inspire an entrepreneurial spirit in my students that motivates them to make unique contributions of self expression to the field of singing.

Each student learns differently, so in my studio I approach and assess students' understanding of breath, phonation, and acoustics differently. As much as possible, I maintain a dialog with students using their own language to help them improve their kinesthetic awareness and proprioception. I have one soprano student, for instance, who feels that she is using "no air at all" when she sings beautifully clear staccato vocalises. Another student is more successful with the same exercise when she has the sensation that she is using "a ton of air!" For me, the most important truth for both students is that they are able to verbalize the sensation of balanced phonation and direct their thinking in the practice room towards a successful and sustainable outcome. Success in my studio also means that students develop an overall technical understanding of how their voice works when it works well, as well as quick tools to self-diagnose vocal fatigue. I believe that part of my role is empowering my students with specific information that will allow them to be their own teacher when they need to be. Every semester, after discussing how I structure a warm-up and why I structure it that way, I assign my applied students a "self-warm-up" lesson. For this assignment, I observe students' vocalises rather than lead them. Through this I learn a great deal about how students approach their time in the practice room, and where they are in their journey of exploring and experiencing their own instrument.

In order to fully engage the body, mind, and voice as one coordinated instrument, singers must identify and release tensions and habits that limit its freedom of expression. Exploring mind/body coordination through traditions including Alexander Technique, Dalcroze Eurhythmics, and Body Mapping allows me to holistically address efficient and energized singing in my studio. As a graduate student at the University of Colorado-Boulder, I worked with the head of the Musicians' Wellness Initiative to incorporate Alexander Technique concepts into my class voice curriculum. Having taught the same course without a mindfulness component previously, I realized just how beneficial somatic body work is in teaching singers to build and use their bodies as finely tuned instruments.

I believe every person's voice has natural beauty in it. Singing is very personal and can often seem inextricable from the singer's identity. For this reason, I focus on students' strengths while also working to address weaknesses in a safe environment. In programming repertoire for my Opera Workshop course at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley last year, I realized I would need to be creative with more than a dozen sopranos/mezzos and less than five tenor/baritone singers enrolled in the course. These beginning singers were not ready for a large scale operatic work, but were eager to explore the idea of opera as storytelling. After some brainstorming, and with the help of a voice faculty colleague, a guest acting clinician, a mental health consultant, and a grant won from the Provost's office, a new performance project for my Opera Workshop course was born. First, we asked students to write a personal narrative statement and extracted some main themes that became our original operatic plotline. We then chose existing opera scenes, songs and arias featuring every singer enrolled in the course that were both pedagogically appropriate and adaptable to our story. Throughout the course of the semester, we worked on developing acting and improv skills and understanding the rhetoric of musical texts. At the final performance of our pastiche opera, the students told beautiful stories, drawn from their own experiences, with improvised dialog and recit connecting the musical selections. At the talkback session after the performance, the students spoke of the ownership they felt of their work and the urgency that fostered in expressing the music. The guiding principle of this project - expressing real human emotions and issues through music - continues to be something I reflect on every day in my own singing and teaching.

In my classroom teaching, I also strive to give students the tools, space, and spark to inspire them on their journey. In addition to applied voice and opera workshop at UTRGV, I taught diction, vocal methods, and a new course I developed called Music Advocacy, Outreach & Entrepreneurship. In addition to reading and writing assignments, I wanted students to apply their research in a way that would allow each of them to claim the title of "Arts Entrepreneur" by the end of the course. As part of their culminating assignment, the projects students developed and presented were wildly different, yet equally inspiring. Two students made business plans, one for an electronic music festival in his small border town and another for a community music school. Another student researched and began an application for a prestigious Fulbright grant in Spain; I was thrilled to learn, a few months later, that she had submitted and won the grant.

Above all, I believe that my success as a voice teacher demands an ongoing curiosity and commitment to exploring the intersections of established pedagogical truths, the aesthetics of different musical styles, and the social landscape that I seek to reflect as an artist. By modeling openness and expressiveness in my own musicianship, I hope to help students develop their own strong foundations upon which they can pursue meaningful artistic lives.