

Robert Edwin, Associate Editor

# “I Learned It From YouTube!” (And Other Challenges of Teaching Voice)

Robert Marks



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**T**HE LABELS “VOCAL COACH” AND “VOICE TEACHER” seem to be used interchangeably nowadays. I love being a singing coach, and I use the word “coach” deliberately. As in the world of sports, we pace in the dugout, cheer from the sidelines, and we’re there to encourage, strategize, motivate, and understand the intricacies of our players. Additionally, a good coach knows his players’ vulnerabilities—both physical and mental—and makes it his job to minimize them.

For over three decades I’ve worked with a variety of students, from the Broadway actor seeking to hone and polish, to the fresh-faced beginner who’s never heard of a larynx or a diaphragm. My students and I have experienced triumph, progress, and discovery, and those wonderful breakthrough moments that make the uphill trudge of repetition and disciplined practice all worth it.

I’d be lying if I said it was all a cakewalk. Just as there are triumphs, so are there challenges. Some are small needling problems, and some are big imposing roadblocks. While trudging uphill, what happens when you can’t quite seem to scale the mountain?

Being an effective singing coach requires a deep understanding not just of music and voice but of *people*. From students’ confining self-doubt to parentally induced pressures, challenges radiate not just from technical limitations, but from an individual’s preconceptions, environment, self-esteem, and personality. Here’s a peek at some of the more confounding challenges I’ve faced, and my best advice on how to overcome them.

## THE “I-THINK-I-CAN’T” STUDENT

Perhaps most prevalent are students who show great potential, but are crippled by thoughts of self-doubt. I call them the “I-Think-I-Can’t” students. These students have internalized the belief that they’ll never be able to step outside their comfort zones, no matter how many times you assure them they exhibit strong potential. Singing requires release, the freedom to wade into the unknown and explore the capabilities of one’s own voice. It’s no surprise that students who doubt themselves find singing and its technical requirements to be particularly trying; helping the student stop this game of mental sabotage is crucial to achieving results.

Journal of Singing, May/June 2013  
Volume 69, No. 5, pp. 000–000  
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National Association of Teachers of Singing

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to instilling confidence in a student. It may take a few weeks to understand what exactly is standing in the way. As the teacher gets to know the students, it's important to individualize the approach to help pupils untie their specific, uniquely tangled, mental knots.

One breed of "I-Think-I-Can't" students are singers who believe they may be tone deaf. The teacher plays a pitch and they have trouble matching it. There have been very few documented cases of amusia, the congenital inability to identify or duplicate musical tones. Yet, some students have entered my studio claiming to be "tone deaf." Now, why would someone who believes he or she is tone deaf decide to take singing lessons? I believe that when someone takes the trouble to make an appointment with me and pays hard-earned money for lessons, he or she must have at least a trace of belief that singing is possible. However, sometimes a few ill-chosen words by a past chorus teacher or choir director are enough to cause a lifetime of erroneous perceptions of one's abilities and talent.

Eventually, if that student decides to give singing one more try, what is said by the coach at the first lesson may have a great deal of importance. The voice professional should avoid making snap judgments about someone's natural musical aptitude, since they can be misleading or completely incorrect. On occasion, I have experienced students who are unable to match any pitch I play on the piano during our initial session. I have to remind myself that singing for a stranger for the first time can be fraught with tension, especially for an inexperienced student. This tension can manifest itself in many ways, including the student seemingly being unable to discern one pitch—or even one octave—from another.

The most important outcome of the first lesson should be developing as much rapport as possible between coach and student. I find it helpful to remind the student that pitch matching is not necessarily required in everyone's day-to-day existence. However, to sing properly, being on key is very important, and we need to work together to get ears, brain, and voice to interact. If I assign an appropriate song to learn, give some honest encouragement, and provide a clear accompaniment practice track, it's very possible that at the next lesson he or she might proudly sing with reasonably accurate pitch. It's similar to a doctor prescribing a medication,

and seeing the effect it has on the patient's symptoms. I'm often pleasantly surprised at the improvement shown at the next lesson.

With most "I-Think-I-Can't" students, improvement involves taking baby steps. Assign small, manageable goals for the week. In the privacy and safety of their homes, students can become more open in discovering their own voices. Once they feel in control, they often see that "I can't" is a myth—one that can, with time, be banished from their lexicon.

With all students (not just the self-doubting ones), I like to develop easygoing communication. I remind students that each lesson is not a performance but rather a "no-pressure zone" where mistakes are allowed and, at times, welcomed. I'm not there to judge but to encourage. In our *American Idol*-saturated culture, where all singing garners certain critiquing, students often come in expecting that I'll flay them to pieces after every exercise. Coaching, I tell them, is quite different than what they've seen on TV. It's my job to help the student grow and discover new territory. A relaxed rapport often establishes a base level of trust and encourages exploration.

### **"EVERYBODY KNOWS BEST"**

Speaking of *American Idol*, I can't help but mention the "Everybody Knows Best" phenomenon. In our *X-Factor*/*America's Got Talent*/*Name Your Reality TV Show* world, I find that students (and their parents) sometimes show up to lessons with preconceived notions about what kinds of songs they want to sing and how they want to sing them. These expectations usually pertain to song repertoire and performance styles, and they're sometimes shocked when I disagree.

Some students want only cutting-edge, show-stopping repertoire or songs with super high belting and tons of riffing. Many times it's because a parent or peer is whispering over their shoulder about what they should or should not be singing. Some contemporary or show-stopping songs may be a good fit, while others may not. In all cases, tell the students that, while you appreciate their enthusiasm, they may be laboring under a few misconceptions about what constitutes a good performance with healthy vocal production.

So what does one do without dashing their enthusiasm? For those who think they have to audition with a

song that no one else has ever heard, remind them that a song needn't be unique in order to be memorable. It's the individual performance that should be noticed. In the words of my late colleague, David Craig: "You don't have to be different to be good, because being good is different enough." In my experience, nobody has been cast in a show solely on song choice.

To debunk students' misconceptions, I liken choosing songs to choosing clothes: they must be appropriate, complement the individual, and might need some alteration. Certain repertoire is just wrong: a middle school student toting "Ladies Who Lunch" in her songbook probably needs to rethink things. Moreover, song selection should be varied. Not every song can be an eleven o'clock number, full of dramatic heft and long sustained notes. It's valuable when a singer has many different kinds of songs under her belt to exhibit different strengths, performance styles, and techniques.

Unfortunately, the online world of YouTube has become a mixed blessing. Posted videos can be an illuminating but confusing place for source material. Students often will want to imitate a certain singer or performance they saw online, when that performance is not only musically unfit, but technically unsound. I remind my students that *anyone* can post a video, and just because they saw something online doesn't make it correct.

### THE "DREAMER OF THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM"

This brings me to the last type of challenge: the "Dreamer of the Impossible Dream." Whereas the "I-Think-I-Can't" student underestimates his or her potential, the "Dreamer of the Impossible Dream" has unrealistic expectations. Maybe it's the lyric soprano who wants to belt like Patti LuPone (whom she saw singing on YouTube), or the baritone who insists he's a soaring tenor. Whatever the case, these students want to bite off more than they can chew.

Indeed, the point of coaching is to help students realize their full potential, but it's a very individualized practice, one that needs to honor each student's unique set of strengths and limitations. First and foremost, the coach should play to students' strengths. Their one-of-a-kind instrument is what makes them unique, and they'll

go much further building upon their natural voice than trying to sound like someone else.

To do so, find repertoire that excites the student *and* suits him or her. Maybe these songs are few and far between, but they're certainly out there. If a student's voice doesn't sound like the majority of today's popular artists or music theater actors, consult the archives to find recordings of singers who *do* share similarities (be it a weakness or a strength). Above all, emphasize good vocal health. Remind students that one person isn't expected to play all different kinds of parts. Frequently I'll ask my female students: "Are you an Elphaba or a Glinda?" It's the rare singer who can healthily sing both these parts from *Wicked* (one a high belter, the other a soprano) and not seem to be straining or out of her comfort zone. Remind students that it's our idiosyncrasies that ultimately make us unique. When it comes to tone and color, the instrument we're born with can prove to be our greatest asset.

Just as individual traits shape singing, so do they shape the way teachers interact with students. At the end of the day, no matter how primed teachers are for hurdles, each student will present his or her own unique set of challenges—that help them continually hone their teaching style. The way teachers respond to each challenge ultimately defines who they are as singing coaches.

Along this winding, pedagogical road (sometimes paved, sometimes bumpy) I have worn many hats: cheerleader, psychologist, even mind reader. Being a singing coach, while not without its challenges, has always been intensely rewarding. I've been fortunate to make my living doing what I love. And—roadblocks or not—I wouldn't trade it for anything.

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**ROBERT MARKS** is a conductor, arranger, composer, and vocal coach. He was a pianist for the Broadway and national companies of the hit musical *Annie*, and spent two seasons as the associate conductor of the St. Louis Muny Opera. His music arrangements have been heard on many recordings of the "Revisited" series on Painted Smiles Records. Recently, he directed ragtime legend Max Morath in *Ragtime and Again* off-Broadway at the York Theatre.

Mr. Marks holds a degree in speech and voice pathology and has taught at the American Musical & Dramatic Academy and the Weist-Barron School in New York. He has been Special Guest Instructor at the Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM) Vocal Pedagogy Institute at Shenandoah Conservatory in Virginia, The New York Singing

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Teachers' Association (NYSTA) Professional Development Program at Columbia University, The Voice Foundation Symposium: Care of the Professional Voice, and at NYU's Steinhardt School of Education. He has given workshops, master classes, and seminars internationally. At a time when all styles of nonclassical music were largely ignored and misunderstood by singing teachers, Mr. Marks helped found the seminal Music Theatre Committee of NYSTA, which continues to be

a key element in its programs. For over 30 years, he has maintained a private voice and recording studio in midtown Manhattan. He is a member of American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP); New York Singing Teachers' Association (NYSTA); National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS); and the National Academy of Recording Arts & Sciences (NARAS). For more information, go to [www.bobmarks.com](http://www.bobmarks.com).