

Vocal Preparation Strategies for High-Performance Juvenile Singers: A Multicase Study

Danyelle Toazza de Cesaro

Music degree– School of Fine Arts, Pontifical
Catholic University of Paraná
Brazil

dany.cesaro@gmail.com

Lyandra Melgarejo Seffrin

Music degree– School of Fine Arts, Pontifical
Catholic University of Paraná
Brazil

lyaseffrin@hotmail.com

Abstract

The present work has as research the strategies of vocal preparation used by singing teachers aimed at the high-performance children and youth public. Considering that the infant-juvenile singer is in full physiological and cognitive development, it was noticed that studies and approaches aligned with high performance are little evidenced in the academic environment, and existing research addresses other segments such as children's choir singing, and introduction to music learning, among others. This research aims to understand the high-performance infant-juvenile singer, considering the different demands that can reach a vocal technique teacher, and map out the strategies used in the preparation of his artistic presentations. Thus, the methodology used is multi-case research with semi-structured interviews. To relate them to the literature found for the foundation of this project, an exploratory study was conducted on data collection performed with the invited teachers. Finally, it is expected to share the discussions and theoretical-practical considerations found, adding to the performance of this audience's future vocal educators.

Keywords: *Juvenile Singers; High performance; Vocal Technique; Vocal preparation; Artistic child labor*

Introduction:

According to Parizzi (2005), singing is a musical practice that begins spontaneously in the first years of the child's life. Kubo and Junior (2016) mention that singing is most often treated as a natural resource of the student, and for this reason, little attention is destined to teaching strategies and vocal care. However, it is necessary to consider that singing results from managing several body structures that are extremely delicate, especially in childhood, where the phonatory apparatus is still in process of development. Thus, singing has techniques and methods that aid in performance and preserve vocal health.

Souza *et al.* (2006, p. 216) said that there are a lot of children with dysphonia even with extraordinary musical skills. Thus, it is understood that this ignorance added to inadequate performances, may imply an overload of the muscles of the phonatory apparatus, and even in possible vocal disorders it works, limiting the functionality of the voice. With this, the authors point out several strategies that favor the correction of misuse and vocal abuse, a common culture in Brazil.

With the popularization of children's reality shows, such as "The Voice Kids", musical theaters, gospel and worship music, choirs, and with the advancement of the Internet⁴, there is a growing interest in the artistic professional development of this audience. This induced a desire to deepen the aspects involving this practice, such as advancement, demands, care, preparation, and the behavior of singers in the long term especially when the practice is carried out in high performance, where many children already work in the form of artistic child labor⁵, supported by the ILO Convention no. 138.

Although much is known about the voice in general, the lack of knowledge about this type of work is prominent, especially regarding high-performance infant vocal preparation since there is a scarcity of studies and approaches aligned with this theme in the academic environment. Therefore, given the existence of this public, it is understood that it needs to be further explored since the published studies address other areas, especially children's choral singing. Unfortunately, there are large gaps in the area of singing voice in Brazil, especially in the case of infant-juvenile singers. Very few specialist speech therapists work with this age group (Souza et al., 2006, p.217).

It is necessary to reinforce the relevance of those who accompany and develop the child's voice in practice, singing teachers, and with this, share in the academic environment the knowledge and considerations realized, given the professional demands focused on the integral preservation of the singer's health.

Therefore, this research mapped the strategies used by teachers in the vocal preparation of high-performance infant-juvenile singers aged between 8 and 15 years with the goal of understanding and structuring methodologies of teaching and vocal technique aimed at the needs of students, based on: 1) the physiology of the children's and youth voice; 2) recent research on singing teaching to this audience; 3) the demands of the high-performance infant-juvenile singer. The methodology was the multicase study, focusing on the survey on the educational practices of singing teachers, aiming to promote reflections on studies in the field, as well as the clarification of problems arising from the inappropriate use of voice in high-performance children and youth. Thus, it is intended to suggest research

⁴According to ICT Kids Online Brazil 2018, about 24.8 million children and adolescents between the age of 9 and 17 use the Internet in Brazil." According to the survey, eight out of ten children and adolescents in the country watch videos, programs, movies, or series on the Internet" P17/09/2019 - 16:39 By Elaine Patricia Cruz - Reporter at Agência Brasil - São Paulo

⁵ "It is considered artistic child work, all artistic activity developed on stages, theaters, circuses, television, or in any type of advertising by children and adolescents." (MARTINS, 2016)

that seeks to deepen the strategies used for this public, fostering an understanding of the seriousness and importance of this practice.

1. Children's musical development:

Estienne (2004) mentions that there is an evident connection between the voice, personality, and emotional state of the individual, where the voice can be seen as a way of expressing emotions. Thus, according to Sobreira (2017, p. 22, our translation), the observed musical behaviors can be understood as products of the interaction between three elements: individual neuropsychological development, particular sociocultural context, and specific musical genre. Therefore, it is necessary to consider that the singer's vocal possibilities will vary according to the stimuli he/she received in his/her musical experience (Ilari and Broock, 2013). According to Sloboda (2008), the development of musical learning can take two ways: enculturation and training. The author mentions that enculturation is considered an intervening factor in primary capacities and cultural experiences that have an impact on the cognitive system, evolving rapidly as other skills are learned. In music, enculturation is marked by rhythmic development, melodic processing, and music learning, usually unconsciously, thus being the first mediators of the expressiveness of children through the artistic manifestations in which they are inserted (Llopis *in* PLAZA, 2014 p. 321, our translation).

Therefore, according to the age range of the present study, this is the period in which the children still cannot measure the dimension of their involvement with musical practice. With this, Ware *apud* Felipe (2013) cites that artistic singing is a human pursuit that is acquired or learned, and increasingly the media has invested in programs with a competition character involving singing. According to Dias (2017, p.12), talent shows are already known since their beginnings in radio, and in addition to aesthetic pleasure, competitors aim to increase and give voice to their underprivileged social category.

*"As they were called in the early years, talent shows or freshman programs appeared on Cruzeiro do Sul Radio in 1935, conceived by radio host Celso Guimarães [...], according to Tinhorão (1981), during the time, the auditoriums of the radios became houses of fun and theater for the lower classes because the programs were seen with hoe among those who were accredited to possess artistic talents" (TINHORÃO *apud* DIAS, 2017, p. 42).*

Currently, programs such as "The Voice Kids" have shown that this art attracts and influences people to enjoy it and awakens the search for this field of action, aiming at possibilities of professionalization (Matias, 2017).

"We can observe in current television programs a tendency to standardize the vocal performance of popular Brazilian singers. The success of American freshman programs, such as American Idol and The Voice, or reflected in Brazil through the import of these franchises, renamed Idols and The Voice Brazil, in which not only the format of the program is reproduced but also the valorization of a standardized aesthetic" (ELME; FERNANDES, 2014, p. 1).

Thus, in addition to *reality shows*, this research will consider high-performance singers, young people who professionally perform the practice, using voice as a working instrument (Zimmer *et al*, 2012) classified by Gembris *et al.* (2020), as the one who trains many hours a day and a week.

2. The voice of children and youth:

When it comes to the physiology of the infant-juvenile voice, it is necessary to understand the specificities of their phonatory device. This age group is a period defined by

physical and physiological development, marked by phases such as pre-adolescence and puberty, which results in biological growth and also influences the act of singing.

"Little is known about the production of voice in childhood, a stage in which numerous transformations of anatomical order [sic]. The larynx undergoes several changes mainly in the first years of life. Therefore, it becomes instigating and challenging to analyze the child's voice, in each year of life, because it corresponds to several stages of development" (BRAGA, OLIVEIRA, AND SAMPAIO, 2009, p. 119).

The child's vocal structure is smaller and more delicate when compared to that of an adult, where the formation of cartilages, mucosa, muscles, and ligaments that act in this practice is not yet complete (Carnassale, 1995). According to Santos (2007), vocal change can be defined as a set of changes in the voice pattern, which would occur between childhood and puberty. Thus, Behlau (2001) mentions that, as the years go by, the vocal tract and larynx change in size and shape, the vocal ligament becomes denser, and the vocal folds gain in intensity, total weight, and emission quality.

According to Gackle apud Mendonça (2011), changes in the female voice are not as noticeable as in the male voices, although they start in girls between the age of 8 and 10, while in boys they start between 10 and 12 years. Similarly, Santos (2007) states that the peak of vocal change is expected in women between 12 and 14 years and in men between 13 and 15 years. Thus, Mendonça (2011) quoting Barresi, explains that there is an increase in the length and width of the larynx of the boy until adulthood, while in girls, the increase is only in length. There is an increase in the circumference and length of the thoracic, which results in greater respiratory capacity and the development of oral and facial structures, reflecting increased resonance.

The voice in this period presents specific characteristics that function as parameters for the work developed with the child and adolescent. They are classified as 1) tessitura, 2) vocal extension, 3) timbre, 4) record, and 5) the F0 (Mendonça, 2011). It is at puberty that male and female voices will differentiate themselves in a matter of height (acute and severe), where, according to Souza *et al.*, (2006), the boy's voice can increase in octave and that of the girl can reduce up to four semitones, and bring more "roughness" and vocal breakage. In agreement with Spazzapan (2019, p. 14) from childhood to old age, F0 is the acoustic parameter that suffers the most changes with growth and aging. In addition, according to Pinho, Korn, and Pontes (2019), masculine and feminine voices may have adjustments and specific features developed according to the singer's needs. As the singer develops and trains, he/she homogenizes his/her timbre, until he/she disguises the exchange of records. +Although record control is an attribute of the glottic source, it suffers influence from the filter as the singer dominates the technique.

Thus, vocal change can cause changes that directly affect the professional performance of the young singer. Singers who are going through this phase need encouragement from their family and their teachers, in addition to differentiated attention, because misuse can cause serious problems not only physiologically but also musically, such as difficulty in tuning, leading to bad or good vocal behavior in the adult. (Kubo and Junior, 2016; Souza *et al*, 2006). Thus, knowing the phases of the singer's vocal development is very important when acting in the professional demand, because the teacher can establish technical exercises and appropriate repertoires, as well as ensure the correct location of the student in vocal sets (Mendonça, 2011, p. 16).

According to Ramos, Souza, and Gama (2017), vocal dysfunctions in children are frequent, and in the age 6% to 23% of the infant population, where the main lesions are related to vocal abuse. Some forms of vocal abuse are more common, according to Jarrus, Pinho, and Tsuji (2004) are the lack of hydration of the organism, screams, strokes of the

glottis, excessive coughing, forcing the voice at extreme heights or flu, vocal practice without specialized guidance and incorrect feeding. The authors recall that the voice is considered a reflection of personality, and can produce tense vocal patterns, causing hyperfunction of the laryngeal musculature.

Thus, in addition to basic and mental care with the voice, Mello e Silva (2008), states that singing requires physical and mental preparation, and adequate training is needed to acquire control and proprioception of phonation, as well as body balance. Therefore, singers exposed to vocal education and frequent training have a higher resistance to vocal fatigue and significantly lower rates of dysphonia than children without training (Williams *et al.*, *apud* Pereira, 2009).

3. Methodology:

This exploratory research aimed to map the vocal preparation strategies used by singing teachers, aimed at high-performance children. Starting with the literature review in books, documents, articles, and scientific journals in the areas of education and teaching of vocal technique, physiology, and speech therapy, intending to understand what has been documented about the aspects of the child's voice in the specificities in this practice. The method used was the multicase study, where data were collected through field research, which occurred in the form of semi-structured interviews via Google Meets and WhatsApp. These, in turn, were organized in a questionnaire with analysis criteria, whose questions were based on the literature review:

1. Performance of the children's singer
2. The influence of the parents and the child's rights
3. The role of voice professionals - vocal habilitation and rehabilitation
4. Vocal and psychological care - being biopsychosocial
5. Vocal evaluation
6. Pillars of vocal technique - heating and reheating
7. Specific strategies

Three singing teachers working with high-performance children and youth audiences were interviewed to survey the singing teaching strategies used. To ensure the anonymity of the participants, we chose to name them interviewee 1, interviewee 2, and interviewee 3. Then, an analysis of the collected data was conducted, qualitatively, integrating and comparing the theoretical data, previously collected through the literature review, with those found in the interviews, seeking to achieve the objective of this survey.

4. Presentation and discussion of data:

4.1. The high-performance infant-juvenile singer:

Interviewee 1 reports that the vast majority of students who seek it or are already doing a solo career or a musical career. The interviewees mention that their students already have a large vocal demand, such as shows, and presentations on social networks, not counting extracurricular and school activities.

"[...] in addition to recording for social networks, some of them already have jobs, so dub, make musical, record single, all this besides the main wear that is the school. Talk, scream, these things that we have to reeducate the child who intends to be a singer [...] so that the voice is always healthy" (INTERVIEWEE 1).

According to interviewee 2, when entering a reality show like *The Voice Kids*, it is necessary to have a routine of singing lessons and a lot of dedication to vocal training, because the requirement is extensive. Interviewee 2 says that students who participated in programs such as *Canta Comigo*⁶ and *Raul Gil*⁷ say that the strategy for this type of performance is substantial because it is often expected of the young singer a "mature" sound. Therefore, in his words, "*high performance requires high dedication*". So, the child needs to be willing to choose from their extracurricular activities, and what time they will make available to dedicate themselves to singing classes.

Thus, as Silva and Junior (2016) quote that "The Voice Brazil Kids presents artists who show in their voices the need to counter the very physiology of the phonatory apparatus, still in development, to achieve their vocal goals". Based on his experience, interviewee 2 reports that students can develop a taste for singing, regardless of whether they have grown up in a musically stimulating environment or not. However, he says that it is very frequent the intervention of parents in this phase, being able to act in a motivating or pessimistic way, not considering the limitations or desires that the young person may have.

"It's hard for parents to understand this, whether it's their dream or their children's, but I can figure it out very quickly and ask, and I'm always asking, 'Do you like to take the class? Do you like coming here? Do you like staying here with me? Do you like to vocalize? Do you like to sing this repertoire? How long do you sing at home?'" (INTERVIEWEE 1 – our translation)

It is known that this process can, besides being delicate, generate controversies in the literature, especially regarding vocal preparation and care. Therefore, high-performance infant-juvenile singers should be treated in a manner relevant to their age group and as biopsychosocial beings, considering their limits and abilities, expertise, desires, especially regarding human rights defended by the ECA (BRASIL, 1990). Martins (2016) for the magazine *Legal Scope* argues that there is a problematization about this practice, but that it is not made for the extinction of artistic child labor, because these minors are an important part of the cultural environment and have a lot of potential for future development. The author argues that it is important to fight for the guarantee of the rights of children and adolescents so that human rights are not violated, interfering in their development. Therefore, it is necessary to think about policies and procedures that guarantee the preservation of these rights in the legislative and musical sphere, so that above all, the integral health of the singer is preserved.

"Depending on the professional activity performed, excessive workload, adverse working conditions, and great interference at the biological, emotional, and environmental levels, such as noise, pollution, and temperature, the voice is often harmed by the misuse and/or abuse of the phonatory apparatus and may present alterations and pathologies, even in non-voice professionals" (QUINTAIROS; RANTALA apud UEDA et al. 2008, p. 557)

This question will directly influence the teaching strategies of vocal technique, method, methodology, demands and frequency, follow-up, and the work of the singing teacher since carelessness can directly affect the children's life. For interviewee 1, "vocal health in children and adolescents should be evaluated by parents, and often parents do not realize that the child is always hoarse, that the child strives to communicate". According to Interviewee 3, compensating the voice by trying to adjust when you have tiredness or hoarseness occurs

⁶ Competitive reality show aired on national television, which showcases the talent of young artists from 9 to 16 years.

⁷ Competitive reality show aired on national network, in which the participant, who can be between 10 and 16 years old, sings 1 minute of the song without being revealed. If at least two jurors approve, the candidate will be revealed.

erroneously, because you will only apply more strength, climb the larynx to be able to compensate and give more intensity to the voice, and in cases of injury, this effort increases.

"The main meaning of the student's daily accompaniment is the observation and characterization of their development to propose methodologies, both for the songs to be sung and for the technique. The definition of the stages will directly interfere with the characteristics of the selected songs, associating them with the cognitive and emotional possibilities of the student, without losing sight of the function of preserving the identity of the student associated with the demands of the work."
(MENDONÇA, 2011, p.57-58)

As mentioned above, several strategies favor the correction of misuse and vocal abuse, aiming to preserve the vocal health of the infant-juvenile singer regardless of their demand. And "vocal health is essential for a long professional career", Scalpel (1999, p. 08) quotes. Interviewee 1 states that monitoring how long the child sings, what he/she sings, and especially the period of vocal rest is very important to define the performance of parents, doctors, speech therapists, and singing teachers. Moreover, it is not recommended to initiate a vocal protocol without the endorsement of a health professional.

Thus, Dinville (1993) mentions that it is a delicate and progressive process that requires a mastery for pedagogy, musical knowledge, and an accurate and selective ear that identifies alteration in the timbre. Therefore, the singing teacher needs to be attentive to the vocal behavior of his/her student, because, in the presence of unusual aspects in his/her practice, a speech therapist should be consulted. The interviewees recall that the singing teacher has a very important role besides providing vocal technical assistance to his/her students, also welcomes, listening, and integrally guides them. A more humanized look is necessary to assure that the student is a being that brings interferences from his day-to-day and the environment in which he/she lives to how he/she interprets the songs.

"The child who broke out and manages to reach the final of the contest of The Voice and "Canta Comigo", [...] are not always the ones who have the best techniques but are the ones who have the best emotional structure. Already facing the emotional structure comes before the technique, and I work with their own musicality. So, my job is to improve something they already have"
(INTERVIEWEE 2 – our translation)

4.2. Specific strategies:

According to Souza *et al* (2006, p. 217), vocal evaluation must be accompanied by a speech therapist competent in the field of singing voice. The authors argue that the collaboration of singing and speech therapy professionals is even more important with high-performance singers because thus professionals will know how to use the analyses and techniques necessary to deal with the problem and avoid future limitations.

When correctly evaluating the infant-juvenile voice, the possibilities of achieving better development and good performance of singing will occur at the moment when the possible vocal problems to be addressed the potential, and limitations of this singer are developed in a systematized way (Souza *et al.*, 2006). Thus, Behlau *apud* Specht (2007), reiterates that professionals need to consider the different techniques, styles, training, and muscle adjustments for the different vocal emissions. After this follow-up, interviewee 1 explains that from the speech-language pathology endorsement, he/she begins to focus on the challenges and vocal qualities that voice already has.

According to Sataloff *apud* Scalpel (1999), warm-up exercises will help the singer develop a proprioceptive awareness of the body in space, strengthen and condition the muscles used in singing, avoid fatigue, tuning compromise, and airflow control also focus on performance Behlau (2014) also says that the vocal warm-up has a pre-use intervention, conditioning, which can vary according to the specificity of each repertoire. Therefore, a

specific post-use intervention of the voice, the reheating, is necessary because “it favors the return to the phono articulatory adjustment of the colloquial voice, avoiding abuse resulting from prolonged use of singing adjustments and promoting recovery after fatigue” (Pinho and Pontes, 2001, p. 100-103).

On the other hand, interviewee 2 reports that at the end of a show, more important than a formal cool-down protocol, good hydration and good hours of sleep are necessary for the muscles to rest with the vocal rest and maintain a good vocal performance. This is the best remedy to avoid wear.

In the literature, there are some breathing techniques. For Carnassale (1995), the singing teacher who teaches his/her student correct breathing - breath support - avoids future vocal problems, since the supported voice provides good control of vocal emission. The practice consists of intercostal expansion and may rely on the aid of the abdomen to delay diaphragmatic movement. Therefore, for interviewee 3, the basis of everything is breathing, but although there is a pattern of behavior, such as a high larynx, and upper breathing, among other basic parameters, the Interviewee reinforces that there is no "recipe" when doing vocal work. Thus, he says that a student who, in addition to singing also dances in his performances, will demand more muscle structures, and will need more effort because the higher the singer's respiratory demand, the greater the muscle management. Moreover, if the child has many difficulties, if he/she cannot tune in, or has a short tessitura, the teacher needs to find out what he/she thinks is most interesting in his/her voice (INTERVIEWEE 1).

In this period of changing voice, the proper posture, a good abdominal level of diaphragmatic breathing, the opening of the mouth and active lips, and the development of the liver and larynx should be increased attention, according to (Barham and Nelson *apud* Mendonça (2011). Pinho, Korn, and Pontes (2019) propose rib opening exercises, with rounded air suction, popularly known as “spaghetti”, to favor the stretching of the vocal tract as well, varying the time interval and lip configuration by necessity. In the case of activation and oxygenation of the vocal folds, lip or lingual vibration can be used together with vocalizes or repertoires that work the passages of recording and projection. The author divides the resonance into different levels: the previous mean projection “m” will favor the most serious notes of popular singing; the previous upper projection “n” is usually used in medium regions of tessitura and legit style; the vertical projection “NH” to enlarge the coverage without producing “brightness”; previous vertical “M” projection to give “brightness” and direct the sound forward and upward.

When you shout to your mother “mom, bring the towel”, then you screamed you hit your head, your amplitude came, because when it came time to sing these “mother” (with a breathy voice), no, it's wrong. So I go through the instinctive part, it's the access memory, but what you already do” (INTERVIEWEE 2— our translation).

For Pereira *apud* Simões (2011), there is no reason not to teach playfully and objectively what is fundamental in the technique of singing, especially about breathing and articulation. Interviewee 2 says that it is not necessary to use very technical terms, considering the age group of the singer. Thus, the basis of vocal technique serves to work any musical genre, and in his classes, this is the first thing to be passed on to the student. Interviewee 3 adds that one thing is to raise the voice to prepare the musculature and another thing is to act on top of the repertoire, to deal with technical issues. Then, within the vocal technique, the musical taste of this student is first classified and then the subdivision of strategies for the profile is made. Therefore, interviewee 2 points out that if the student wants to sing an opera, it is necessary to study the Italian singing method, for example, if you want to go to *heavy metal*, then you will study the *drive*, if you want to go to *pop*, then you will practice *belting*.

"Thus, the repertoire should be chosen considering the vocal tessitura of the child and should be composed mostly of short sentences, descendants, joint degrees, and small intervals. Melodies that require slow time and phrases of great support should only be given to children who already have some vocal technique, as they require pneumatic co-ordering and accurate aerodynamic management" (PEREIRA, p. 41, 2009).

The teacher should be dynamic. According to Interviewee 2, some protocols will guide the work of the singing teacher. When proposing vocal exercises and specific strategies, the singing teacher needs to consider the demands and difficulties of the student, because if the singer has difficulty with breathing, for example, it is necessary to focus on exercises that can bring practical solutions, focus on a critical point of the song. In addition, interviewee 3 mentions that the vocalization serves to bring a specific vocal fit, and if only one repetition occurs without necessarily understanding what needs to be adjusted, it will not be useful, and nothing will behold with it.

Therefore, it is observable that, when synthesizing the 3 interviews conducted, we realized that the student's repertoire guides the strategies of high-performance vocal preparation. However, it is perceived that even though the vocal care and well-being of the children's singer are important, the focus of the work is the performance itself.

5. Conclusion

There is difficulty in finding national bibliographic references about specific vocal techniques for the high-performance children and youth public and most of the published works are part of the literature of paid and international collections. The articles found for this research mostly address other singing demands, such as school choirs and children's music education.

There was also a lack of vocal strategies of proven efficacy for this audience. Thus, there is a gap between the professional's knowledge of high-performance practice and an impact on his performance, leading the teacher to more intuitive and practical work. Consequently, there is a divergence with the literature, because, in the studies of children's singing and its specificities, the care of the phonatory apparatus and the impacts of vocal abuse in childhood are more emphasized, while in professional preparation care is more focused on performance and the result.

Another relevant point is that in addition to the young singers being in the process of development, he/she is still dependent on his/her parents or legal guardians. Thus, it is necessary to look back at the family core and understand the extent to which the search for artistic professionalization, especially in singing, is the legitimate desire of the child or parents. In this sense, it is perceived that in addition to vocal accompaniment, psychological follow-up is also very important, because together with the protocols that are inherent to this practice, the choices will require emotional management and time and the consequences may affect the life of the singer and his/her family core.

It is necessary to produce other research that deepens the practice of high performance, aiming, with exponential growth from the public, vocal preparation strategies appropriate to the age group thinking beyond vocal care, in guaranteeing their rights and the integral health of the singer as a biopsychosocial being.

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