

### Part III

## Teacher's Guide

### What is an Aging Singer?

The definitions of aging singers are as varied as the terminology used to describe them. In my work with these singers, they have called themselves “mature” singers, older adult singers, aging singers, and even old-people singers. Further description and explanation is needed to make distinctions among all these students of singing. This book, however, focuses specifically on the complex issues relevant to aging *amateur* singers.

In all of my research and presentations, I have referred to an **aging singer** as someone 60 years or older who enjoys singing in groups or as a soloist, usually in church or community chorus situations. Laura Berk, in her textbook, *Development Through the Lifespan*, defines late adulthood as age 65 to the end of the lifespan (562). This closely corresponds to the definition I have described above. By no means are we discussing the needs of aging professional singers, nor will we attempt to turn aging voices into professional quality instruments. Rather, we will examine the characteristics and needs of this large student population whom we encounter as voice teachers and choir directors.

My categorization of aging singers is based on students I have had in class or lessons or have observed in church choirs. These categories primarily are based on level of involvement in singing and past musical training. “**Lifers**,” for example, are people who sing regularly, at least once a week in formal ensemble such as a church choir or community chorus. They are the regulars, who have sung in these situations for many years and for whom the thought of ceasing this activity is not an acceptable option. They also may have enhanced their musical experiences by participating in community musical theater, a barbershop or “beauty shop” (e.g. Sweet Adelines) chorus or quartet, and may have sung as a

soloist in church or with a big band. More often than not, they have had voice lessons in the past, but may not actively be engaged in that pursuit at the moment. They understand the basics of singing but are open to learning more about their individual instruments and bodies, and discovering or rediscovering cherished vocal literature. One of my most recent students grew up singing hymns at church, took voice lessons in college, and sang solos in informal recitals with his pianist wife. At the age of 84, he is still active in his church choir and enjoys bringing music from his past to our class. He is definitely a “Lifer.”

“**Groupies**” (pun intended) are aging singers who participate in vocal music enterprises through a church or community musical organization, but are not experienced or necessarily comfortable with solo singing. Most often they have not made participation in vocal music organizations a central part of their lives, possibly joining and rejoining them as their schedules have allowed. They usually never have taken voice lessons and therefore have a limited understanding of their instruments. They present with no debilitating vocal habits and are able to explore their vocal potential quite easily. My most recent example of a “groupie” is a pair of sisters who joined my class in order to return to singing duets together. Both sing in a church choir and have a history of singing in quartets with their brothers. Neither has any vocal dysfunction, but they need additional information about techniques for breathing, proper vowel resonance, and details of the singing process.

The “**Wounded Warbler**” is a third category of aging singers with varying amounts of participation in singing, but who now have some type of vocal dysfunction. Most often, phrasing, tuning and vibrato are the most significant problems. They may have been absent from vocal enterpris-

es for quite some time because of their vocal problems, but they generally miss these experiences and are seeking ways to rejoin them. These are the most challenging students with whom we work. But when each particular dysfunction is understood and time and patience are applied, they generally find ways to work around the dysfunction. I have encountered both male and female singers in this category who have vibrato problems. Each has focused on healthy breathing and resonance techniques and has managed to make progress despite the inability to turn back the clock. Finding appropriate literature also has helped, as has increasing their basic understanding of the singing process.

We should not forget those singers that I call **“Explorers.”** These people are quite inexperienced as singers, having had no formal vocal training and no consistent participation in vocal enterprises. They may or may not have been professional voice users, such as pastors or teachers, but they have little or no understanding of their instrument. They simply are curious learners. These singers are some of the most enjoyable because they possess so many characteristics of committed lifelong learners. One student I encountered in an early voice class was so intrigued by the process of singing that he joined the local town and gown choir and began taking private voice lessons. He is a classic example of an Explorer.



Figure 1. Continuum of Singing Activity.  
Least active to Most Active

Of course there are singers who do not fall cleanly into these categories. Trends in participation and experience can be clues to vocal problems and/or the raw material with which voice teachers and choir directors must work. Knowing

our students’ background, knowledge, motivation, and any hindrances to their development can help us make their learning more efficient and successful.

### **What can Aging Singers do for Voice Teachers and Choir Directors?**

The relationship between aging singers and their teachers is not one-sided, with aging singers receiving all of the benefits. This population of students can increase a teacher’s pool of students and have a positive impact on his or her income and influence in the community. Teachers then are able to increase the understanding of vocal concepts for more students, producing better-informed singers who contribute more positively to solo and group vocal efforts. These students also provide satisfying teaching experiences. They are interesting people with a wealth of history and experience to share, and in general are highly committed because they are self-motivated to study, not forced by parents or others who think taking a lesson or a class is a good idea.

Teachers also broaden their own contributions to community musical experiences when they have more students to draw from for a wide variety of performances, such as singing the national anthem at a local baseball game or putting a group together to sing at local nursing homes. All of these benefits are a result of mutual efforts to enjoy the study and teaching of singing and are a tribute to the value found in teaching older adults.

### **What can Teachers do for Aging Singers?**

To be most effective, teachers need a broad understanding of the many changes experienced by older adults during the aging process. Anatomic and physiologic, as well as psychosocial and cognitive changes are many and varied in aging singers. But understanding how these adults are influenced to think and act in learning and social situations allows teachers to identify problems quickly and to find appropriate solutions. A choir

director can facilitate retention by presenting information within a specific context. For example, she can help to ensure that desired breathing and phrasing is retained from rehearsal to rehearsal by writing them into the musical score (which also helps to reduce frustration caused by choir members who can't remember instructions from week to week). Because aging singers come to teachers with varied life experience, health status and motivation, it is necessary for teachers to have a basic understanding of age-related changes to the instrument and the pupil to enhance his musical experience.

Anatomic and physiologic changes to the body and larynx can lead to decreased vocal ability and increased frustration for many aging singers. Robert Sataloff states that age-related changes to the voice generally are caused by lessened neurologic function, loss of muscle bulk and elasticity, decreased respiratory function and blood flow, and ossification of cartilages (20).



Figure 2. Relationship of Changes in the Aging Process.

Difficulty maintaining breath through long phrases, instability of pitch, and declining posture are just a few of the problems that aging singers present. It is important to know that “many of these acoustic phenomena are not caused by irreversible age changes. Rather, they may be consequences of poor laryngeal, respiratory, and abdominal muscle condition, which undermines the power source of the voice” (Sataloff, 34).

### What changes do we need to consider?

So with what changes, exactly, must older adults cope? Changes in social roles and groups,

information processing, problem solving and memory, as well as learning goals and attitudes toward learning are important components of life-cycle changes. We commonly think of these as changes in psychosocial behavior and cognitive function.

Despite the effects of the aging process on singing abilities, many people stay involved in group music-making not only for the musical experience, but also to maintain social contacts. Imagine a widower who attended choir rehearsals with his wife. Her passing and his avoidance of reminders of her presence could create a void in his social interactions. But if he maintains his membership in a choir, he maintains his interactions with others and decreases the possibility that a loss of role, social isolation and/or marginalization will occur (Brandtstädter 124).

It is important that teachers remember the social function of their organizations and allow for those moments as well. They need to comprehend the impact of changing social and personal roles on involvement, comprehension, and commitment while recognizing that these factors affect older adults at different rates and varying degrees. For teachers, the result of dealing with multiple changes to the body and psyche of older adults is a renewed focus on establishing and maintaining the coping mechanisms that work for each student's unique situation. In other words, finding ways for singers to reminisce during a lesson through choice of literature or conversation allows them to cope with loss of significant others and feelings of aloneness. Keeping them connected to friends and acquaintances provides a diversion from the painful reminders of a loved-one's absence. These social dimensions of interpersonal connection easily can be facilitated by voice teachers and choir directors.

Changes in roles, isolation and depression are significant issues with which some older adults deal during the aging process. Some have difficulty transitioning from work to retirement; some have significant health issues that impact the fre-