



# Teaching the World to Sing— Cross-Cultural Considerations

By Dr. Sherri Weiler

As technology continues to shrink the globe, voice teachers can benefit from moving their sphere of expertise to a wider, more global approach. We already provide vocal training in multiple modes—musical theater, CCM, pop-rock, and of course art song and opera—but we often do not know how to teach singing effectively to students who hail from a non-Western culture, or whose primary musical language is not European. Technological advances in communication have rendered nearly all global cultures instantly present and available. Voice lessons are now being taught on Skype; in fact, one of the Gold-level sponsors at the recent 55<sup>th</sup> NATS conference in Las Vegas (June 2018) was a start-up company whose marketing thrust was a software program designed to make online voice teaching more accessible. This gigantic step forward gives voice teachers and their students the option of being half a world apart. Global unrest continues, and newly-made refugee and immigrant populations are popping up all across the Western world. Voice lessons may be perceived as elitist in some circles, but vocal music is universal and the demand for hearing it, making it, studying it, and believing in it will not go away. We can be a part of the change we want to see in our splintered, jaded world by opening ourselves to teaching with a more globally-inclusive awareness.

In 2016, I accepted a position teaching voice at the American University of Sharjah (AUS) in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Sharjah is known as the “cultural and educational emirate,” while nearby Dubai strives to be known as the “commercial, or business emirate.” AUS has a higher percentage of international students than any other world-ranked institution, according to an analysis of the UK-based *Times Higher Education* data. Some 84% of the university’s student body is made up of international students, who come from nearly 100 different countries including but not limited to India, the United States, Canada, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Africa, Pakistan, Southeast Asia, and the UAE.



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Every lesson I teach, every learning interaction in or out of the classroom, is encountered and shared through these multicultural lenses. This amazing experience has challenged me to reduce my teaching to the most universally accessible concepts I can find; consequently, I have created a way to reformulate my tried-and-true-in-the-US methods to encompass the diversity of the students I now teach.

## Recognize Culturally-Based Learning Preferences and Styles

The first element in the process towards a more global pedagogy is a thorough understanding of our students' own culturally-based success orientations. According to Dr. Paul Kurucz, author of *How to Teach International Students: A practical teaching guide for universities and colleges*, there are numerous differences between "local" students and "international" or "foreign" students. Over a 17-year period of teaching international students, both abroad and in Canada, Kurucz developed a model which he calls the Success Orientations Model. We tend to be *relationship-oriented*; *process-oriented*; or *goal-oriented*.<sup>1</sup> The model can be used to help understand the motivations and behavior of any individual in any country, but is especially helpful in understanding how students from diverse cultural backgrounds go about the process of learning, the process of interacting with their teachers, and the process of achieving success in their educational goals. Diverse cultural groups tend to have distinctly different motivational and behavioral tendencies in general, and more traditional, non-Western cultures (anywhere outside of the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the UK, and Western Europe) tend to define "success" very differently than those of us who are from Western countries. Certainly, all people feel successful when they accomplish the myriad details of daily living; what differs is how we go about achieving and "owning" these successes.

Most people tend to be naturally oriented towards one particular style, or a mix of two modes, when pursuing success in any given endeavor. Of great interest to me as an academic voice professional is how singing students pursue and achieve success within their specific cultural paradigm. I read this book during my second semester teaching in the Emirates, and Kurucz's thesis simultaneously completely changed and totally validated my own experiences as I sought to understand my students' attitudes towards their achievements in singing. As with over-simplifying any complicated process, there are obvious limitations in these narrow delineations, and we should be aware that this is only a model—human beings are complex individuals. However, from a cultural perspective, this model can be quite enlightening and points the way towards a more informed world view.

## Relationship-Oriented People

Relationship-oriented individuals consider other people to be central to their success and happiness. They expect that friendships, associations, and interactions with other people will most

<sup>1</sup> Paul J. Kurucz, *How to Teach International Students: A practical teaching guide for universities and colleges* (Victoria, British Columbia: Success Orientations Publishing, 2008).



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likely be the route to success in their lives. (“Phone a friend” is the buzz-word here.) Some specific cultures that demonstrate strong relationship-oriented tendencies are India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh; Italy, Spain, and Latin America; Arab and Middle Eastern cultures. Students from these cultures will try to build a connection with you; they are more focused on getting to know you as a teacher/person; to them, success will come from their relationship with you, not from their individual efforts. They enjoy a group endeavor, such as singing in a choir or opera chorus. You will need to spend more personal time with them, asking questions about their families, their lives outside of class, even learning to pronounce their given names correctly, before bringing them into the specific purpose of teaching them to sing. Only then will they be receptive to your agenda.

My students Sama and Esma, from Oman and Algeria respectively, clearly demonstrated their relationship-oriented bias early on. They began dropping by my open-doored office just to plop into a chair and chat; they often brought small snacks to share; they asked me questions about my adjustment to the AUS and Arab culture. Soon they were suggesting dinner at my house—I live on campus in faculty housing—which they brought with them from a local restaurant. They asked if they could bring along a few other friends, some of whom I taught and others whom I didn’t. They literally pulled me into a relationship with them and their greater circle of friends. At first I was suspicious—what did they want from me? Better grades? Letters of recommendation? Gradually I realized that they only wanted to know me, and that they respected my years of experience and my American “otherness.” There is an overall respect for age and older people in all relationship-oriented cultures that we seldom see in the West. Even though I am probably the same age (or even a little older) than their parents, this presented no obstacle to their desire to be in relationship with me. Sama studied voice with me for only one semester, and Esma for two, during my first year at AUS. Despite not teaching either during my second year, they both continue to drop by and chat. We are all richer for that commitment.

## Process-Oriented People

These individuals like instructions, directions, policies, rules, outlines—they believe that following a trusted process will lead to success. If no clearly outlined procedures are in place, a process-oriented person will feel cut-off, lost, unable to complete the assignment. Working within a well-defined structure will provide the best chance of success for this student. One of my favorite students is Mohammad, and when I began to teach him how to breathe for singing, my instruction had to become very process-oriented because of his computer engineering major. He had a genuine desire to understand the science behind it; he enjoyed hearing how the velocity of airflow must remain constant in order to approximate the vocal folds for clean adduction. Structured communication skills are important to a process-oriented individual. I allowed my language to change, becoming extremely detailed and specific. I used terms to delineate the process for him: First, we need to release the tension in the abdominal muscles. Second, we must allow the pharynx to relax in order for breath to be drawn into the lungs by the natural vacuum created when the diaphragm is allowed to do its work. Third, we must establish new abdominal tension to impact the diaphragm so that the airflow may become constant. These instructions were accompanied with exercises designed to bring about the desired effect, and I had a very successful singer on my hands within a few short weeks of beginning instruction. Mohammad continues to grow and improve and has begun to build a relationship with me. Mohammad was not taking applied voice lessons simply to have fun or “explore” the possibilities; he needed a high degree of structure with a set path for success. Although Mohammad, as an Arab male, is already relationship-oriented, with me (a Western female) the relationship-building took a back seat until I had established myself as “legitimate,” someone he could learn from and have confidence in. Ancillary to my relationship with Mohammad is the fact that he suggested his younger sister come sing in my no-audition, all-volunteer women’s choir. I understood this to be the mark of respect that it clearly was, and it increased my esteem for Mohammad as well.

Rankings, titles, and social hierarchies are very important to a process-oriented person; clear assessment structures are likewise important. My process-oriented students are careful to address me with respect, calling me “professor” or Dr. Sherri. They will ask for clarification of the procedures; they won’t open up to me to establish a relationship until they’re sure of reciprocity. When I assign a new song, or even introduce a new exercise, I am careful to explain in precise detail exactly *why* I am making the assignment and what the desired outcome is. Cultures that demonstrate strong process-orientation are often found in Germany,



*Mohammad*

Switzerland, and Austria; China, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea; and other cultures that tend to have a long history and an isolation from other cultures, both in business and in marriage.

## Goal-Oriented People

Focusing with unwavering attention on a goal shimmering in the distance is what motivates these individuals. Their goals are often outlined with maximum exactness and all their energy is directed towards achieving this specific dream. These people love a challenge, a competition, and doing things on their own. They are self-motivated and will use relationship- and process-oriented people to their advantage; then, when the goal is achieved, they will often turn away from the “friendships” that helped them achieve the goal. Goal-oriented students need to see the prize at the end before they begin working for it. Goal-oriented voice students will love choosing music for an upcoming competition; they will thrill to the challenge of knowing they only have a limited amount of time before they must compete. They will be less enamored of the assigned “big aria” that may take years to grow into, because they won’t have the patience and cannot “see” the goal clearly. These singers crave recognition for superior performance and achievement. It will come as no surprise that the culture most clearly associated with strong goal-orientation is the USA. Other cultures have pockets of individuals, particularly in certain leadership fields, but not many cultures have the overall extreme goal orientation that the US has on so many diverse levels of society. Any kind of leadership in general is attractive to a goal-oriented person; individualism and standing out in a crowd of contenders are key concepts for the goal-oriented person.

Some cultural factors which contribute to a society rich in goal orientation include a population which believes strongly in individualism, personal freedom, self-reliance, self-determination, and personal wealth; large, open spaces where freedom of movement is possible; a culture with fairly low religious impact due to religious diffusion; and intense satisfaction from being Number One. These students are likely to want to call you by your first name, not your title; they will seek to clarify goals so that they can *bypass* the rules and regulations, not follow them; they are open about their feelings and experiences and will interrupt you to ask a question; they will most likely enjoy working alone and will try to avoid group projects. Teachers of these students will be able to cut to the chase very quickly; will be able to discuss the student’s future and help them make a plan to achieve their goals. Feedback can be structured around how their actions have fallen short of achieving the goal, because it will give them a clear understanding of exactly what it will take for the goal to be

achieved next time. As teachers of goal-oriented students, our students will love hearing about our own past musical triumphs and accomplishments, and they will want to use our success strategy as a blueprint for achieving their own successes. Taking a mentorship role will garner us respect and understanding from our students, who will want to model themselves on us.

Moderation in all things is the key to success, and every success orientation has its negative as well as its positive attributes. After taking a quick glimpse through the lens of the success orientation model, it is my hope that we can better structure our teaching strategies to help each individual student achieve the success he so dearly desires.

## Keep the Student's World at the Core of the Teaching-Learning Process

A huge positive to working with students from a relationship-oriented culture can be found in how the meaning of the lyrics is approached. My students often come from ethnicities that include ancient oral traditions, and they are quick to pick up on the idea that performing a song is more about communicating oral/aural value than about singing correctly. Research has shown that the process of teaching music performance in the West has typically been centered on the development of technical skills, with less importance being given to teaching musical creativity.<sup>2</sup> This is something I have consciously chosen to change when teaching my multi-cultural students by using an approach more centered on *learning* than on *teaching*. Most of us vary the delivery from student to student, but basically rely on our tried-and-true teaching competencies that have always worked for us. This is easy because our cultural milieu and language is usually the same as our student's. We can change our cultural bias by structuring our skills training to be more about the *learner's needs* than about our own comfort level.

In my own teaching, I find myself less geared towards achieving "perfection" in my students' singing than I am towards giving them the tools to perform with confidence and success. This means teaching the basics of posture and breathing and allocating less time to teaching Western music history through repertoire, which I would totally emphasize when training American voice majors. For instance, I will assign a male student a highly-accessible, easy song by Schubert, such as "Der Neugierige," to teach German diction along with a specific skill such as cultivating the partial breath while maintaining legato, but not because I want him to thoroughly understand and experience *Die schöne Müllerin*, as important as that may be. Instead I will emphasize basic pedagogy and performance/emotive aspects *at the same time*.

<sup>2</sup>Patricia A. González-Moreno, "Performance creativities in higher music education," in *Developing creativities in higher education: international perspectives and practices*, by Pamela Burnard (New York: Routledge, n.d.), 87-98.

I will use the songs I assign to help them develop skills of musical interpretation and to help them develop independence and individuality as soon as possible.<sup>3</sup> I want my students to take ownership of the song, even if it's not perfectly executed, and learn performance as a skill they can use throughout their lives in whatever fields of work they may find themselves. A fine example of this concept is found with Nourhan, a shy Egyptian girl who fell in love with "On My Own" from *Les Misérables* the first time she heard another student singing it in studio class. For this song, she became incredibly goal-oriented! She worked hard to perfect that song because she wanted so very badly to sing it—it had personal meaning for her and, because of that, everyone who heard her perform it was brought into her created realm. There was a distinct break between her well-established, natural belt voice and her acquired Western-style head voice, but no one who heard her sing was the least bit bothered by that. Nourhan's confidence grew immensely through that song and now she cannot wait to get back to lessons this fall—my biggest challenge with her will be to find appropriate repertoire that both thoroughly engages her imagination *and* teaches her the vocal skills I need her to develop.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.



Nourhan

Another principle aspect that needs to be addressed is that non-Western cultures are usually much more conservative than that of today's average American families. The family as a unit is still greatly respected, and its rules are adhered to in a way that American youth have been fighting for decades. There are also other socio-cultural elements in place with many of my international students which sometimes foster, and sometimes inhibit, the development of musical creativities in performance. Chief among these is religion. Teaching students who comes from a conservative religious background, whether Muslim or Christian, always requires careful consideration and a sincere absence of judging on our part. There is a common thread in Islamic thought which states that anything which does not lead one towards Allah is to be eschewed; likewise, any public calling of attention to the self is also to be avoided. This has enormous consequence for musicians and performers in the Arab world and is even more impactful for Muslim women who are singers. Certainly there is a large body of contemporary popular or folk/ethnic music in Arabic, well-known and established in the Arab world, and it is to be noted that the two best-known purveyors of this music are women: Umm Khalthoum and Fairouz. Again, the repertoire I choose with my students must have an uplifting or beneficial effect upon both singer and listener alike if they are to feel they are operating within the bounds of their prevailing traditions and culture. Western culture emphasizes self-expression; most other cultures do not! Building musical confidence becomes a much deeper and less shallow endeavor with these more traditional cultures. It is only through respect for your student's cultural environment, and through choosing repertoire which helps inculcate the most genuine values, that you can begin to build

the trust necessary for a successful student-teacher rapport. And only after establishing trust can we begin the next phase: the pedagogy of singing to achieve creative success.

Beginning your teaching conversation with “what do we think we know” opens the door and welcomes all kinds of “knowings;” at the same time, it directs the conversation towards “how” your students came to know what they know. A pedagogy of creativity is a pedagogy of values.<sup>4</sup> You will be surprised at what your students from diverse cultures already do know, and this is as good a place as any to begin teaching pedagogy. All you need to do is ask them. When our students from divergent backgrounds take part in reciprocal learning and receive mutual responsiveness from us, they begin to build bridges of knowledge and comprehension between local traditions and musical cultures of the world. My students already know what good singing is, and they already know how to do it—what they don’t know is how *I* want them to accomplish it, and more importantly, *why*. When I can impart my knowledge and also validate their own understanding—then authentic learning takes place, and both of us are richer for the experience.

I hope I have awakened your desire to embrace students from other cultures, especially non-Western cultures, through this article. These beautiful students whom I have had the privilege to teach for the past two years have taught me much more than I’ve taught them. They’ve taught me that an open heart is always the best heart to have...that success can be measured in often contradictory and surprising ways... that winning is not necessary for growth of self-esteem and knowledge... and that people are pretty much the same everywhere, no matter the cultural climate, if you are dedicated to helping them achieve *their* innermost dreams filtered through *your* expertise.

<sup>4</sup>Cathy Benedict, “Creativity in and through pedagogy,” in *Developing creativity in higher education: international perspectives and practices*, by Pamela Burnard (New York: Routledge, n.d.), 187-197.

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