

Yes, They Are Ready: Teaching Very Young Singers An interview with Nikki Loney, Founder of The Full Voice

NATS member Nikki Loney believes that young children of all abilities can greatly benefit from introductory vocal music lessons. Nikki's mission (or "evil agenda") is to encourage more teachers to open up their teaching studios to young singers.

Inter Nos: Tell us how you got started teaching singing lessons to students as young as five. Is there anything in your academic or pedagogy training that had prepared you to work with very young singers?

Nikki Loney: {Laughing} I wasn't prepared at all. I earned my stripes in the trenches. I was a performance major (in Jazz) who started teaching out of financial necessity. I was young, and I needed the money. My first teaching position was in a small music store, and I had inherited a roster of students of all ages. Most of them were 5-10 years old. In the very beginning, 23 years ago, I had no resources, no colleagues, and teaching soon became a part time job that I hated. The young singers caused me so much stress that eventually, after three years of suffering, I refused to teach students under the age of 10. This decision meant that I had to teach beginner piano to fill the holes in my teaching schedule. I attended many beginner piano pedagogy workshops, and I witnessed how inspired piano teachers worked with little students as young as three and four years old. The piano presenters' approach to working with this young age group was fun, play-based and exploratory and the little piano students were smiling and playing the instrument expressively with beautiful technique. Piano students had fun method books that made teaching so much easier! It made me rethink my approach with my young singers. I slowly started to welcome back the young students to my studio. I started to create one-page activity sheets for my voice students. This was the very beginning of the *Full Voice Workbooks*. With a different mindset, handy worksheets and a new approach, working with young singers became the highlight of my teaching day, and I saw fantastic progress and musical development with singers of all abilities - some as young as six years old.

Inter Nos: There are (still) a lot of voice teachers who believe that singers younger than 12 or 13 are not ready for individual lessons. What would you like to say to these colleagues?



Nikki Loney working with a young singer during a lesson

NL: I appreciate that working with the young singer is not for everyone. We all have a demographic of student that we enjoy teaching. It is a smart business person who can define their target student and build a fantastic teaching studio around it. **However, the language of "not ready" is a personal bias not based in fact.** What are they not ready for exactly? Not ready to discover and explore their voices? Kids love to sing. They sing at school; singing helps them learn; they sing when playing and most importantly they are curious about singing. Exploring the voice and building confidence is much easier before they hit puberty! Not ready to learn the language of music? Music is a collaborative art form, and I believe every music teacher should be teaching music literacy. That is not exclusively the piano teacher or classroom teacher's responsibility.

There is a vast and incredible community of professional voice teachers who are facilitating healthy, fun and educational vocal music lessons for young singers. {Deep sigh} So, my respected professional Voice Teachers, the next time you see a question about helping a young singer on a voice forum, please refrain from "shaming" teachers who work with young singers on public forums by declaring that children are "not ready." Comments like that are insulting to many of your colleagues, and I believe these types of comments are damaging to our profession and lessen the value of teacher forums.

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Inter Nos: What advice do you have for voice teachers who are enthusiastically (or grudgingly) considering teaching very young singers? What are some of the most important things for teachers to understand about teaching young singers?

NL: Thank you for asking that question. My evil agenda is to encourage more teachers to welcome young singers into their teaching studios. With the right mindset and approach, it is incredibly rewarding work. And I am not talking about young students who are gifted or “talented.” Helping shy or anxious young singers find their voices will make your heart melt. Singing is for everyone and working with a child who struggles with pitch can help a voice teacher develop one incredible teaching tool box. Many of the strategies I use with my very young singers also work well with my adult students (with some slight modifications of course!)

NL: I believe that families need to be involved in music lessons. In a healthy, supportive way of course! I tell parents that they need to find a teacher that is excited to work with kids, is experienced with helping singers with first performances, and has an open-door policy so they can be part of the learning process. Everyone needs to work together to support the child.

Inter Nos: What are some ways that teachers can include the parents in the lessons? Do you worry about stage moms or parents who push their kids to be stars?

NL: In general, the teacher vs. parent relationship in private music lessons is very challenging. Many teachers treat parents as the enemy rather than allies. Yes, some parents are heavily involved in a child’s lesson, but I would rather have a parent actively involved than not interested. I believe part of our job as teachers is helping the family understand how to best support a child in lessons. Open and honest communication is

“There are many reasons why a student struggles with stillness. They are not misbehaving! So, what would happen if we encourage movement in the lesson?”

I believe introductory lessons are about the basics. Before diving into the repertoire, we can help our singers immensely by helping them develop confident singing skills. We work on singing without hesitation and having the ability to sing unaccompanied. I encourage exploring the voice by playing fun games and having the student sing without the assistance of the piano or the teacher. When a singer sings confidently, they learn repertoire quickly, are more responsive to corrections to their vocal technique and have far less performance anxiety. I call it making peace with the voice.

I would like to remind teachers that the master/apprentice model of teaching doesn’t work with children. (It doesn’t work with young adults either, but that is an entirely different conversation!) We need to meet students where they are in their physical and emotional development and not expect them to cater to us. An example of this would be the child that is fidgety and will not stand still. Many teachers are frustrated by this behavior and declare them not ready for lessons. However, there are many reasons why a student struggles with stillness. They are not misbehaving! So, what would happen if we encourage movement in the lesson? We could use solfege hand signs, or we could incorporate simple stretches with the vocal warm ups, the possibilities are endless.

Inter Nos: You mention that voice lessons for this age require the “right teacher” and enormous parent support. What qualities should parents look for in a teacher?

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essential. I believe email and texting are the absolute worse forms of communication. So, I ask parents to be in the lessons in the beginning. I think students need to be comfortable singing in front of mom and dad so they can feel comfortable practicing at home. This is one of the first steps to helping a young singer with first performances. As the child gets older, parents can drop them off or hang out in the lounge, but they do need to check in every once and awhile. If I look back on my teaching studio, the students with the most outstanding progress, who studied with me forever were the ones that I had an open, honest and welcoming relationship with the mom and dad. I have only had a couple of extreme “stage moms,” and I was able to set clear teaching and business boundaries, communicate my concerns, and cultivate a healthy relationship with the family. I should probably mention that my teaching studio focuses on non-competitive performance opportunities which deter the unkind, result driven personalities.

Inter Nos: Where do you find good songs for kids? Is it mostly just Disney songs?

NL: Disney songs are great. I also like the repertoire in the RCM curriculum. [Royal College of Music, Music Development Program.] The major publishing companies do have excellent compilations of folk songs and musical theatre for the young singer. Finding age appropriate repertoire is so much easier now.

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I recommend checking with colleagues about their favorite first songs for young singers. I always appreciate discovering a new song! That being said, with my youngest students, we don't necessarily dive into repertoire right away. I let parents know that the first few months are about musical discovery and having fun. There is no pressure to sing songs or perform right away. This allows me to get to know the student, assess their abilities and when they are ready for repertoire, I have an easier time finding a great song for them.

Inter Nos: Do you teach singers of all ages, and if so, do you program intergenerational performances or separate recitals for younger and older students?

NL: A great question! I work with singers of all ages, and I have a growing demographic of adult avocational singers ages 40 and up in my studio. At first, I did a separate recital for the adults, but for the past two years I have included everyone at the recital, and it has been fantastic. The younger students and their families enjoy the adult performers, and my adult singers love hearing the kiddos. I am so pleased with this supportive community within my students. This friendly atmosphere allows my new or anxious singers to have a positive experience on the stage.

Inter Nos: How do you manage to teach songs, basic music theory, ear training, rhythm training, and sight reading in a weekly 30-minute lesson?

NL: I no longer offer 30-minute lessons. Even with older students the 30-minute lesson was too rushed. I changed my studio to 45-minute lessons about eight years ago. **Best decision ever.** I get to spend more time with every student and don't have to teach as many singers in a day. The 45-minute lesson time allows me to facilitate comprehensive and multi-sensory music lessons and I have far less teacher burnout! I highly recommend that teachers consider this option. And yes, even my young 6-year-old singers have 45-minute lessons and they often don't want to leave because we are having fun. You have to be flexible with young students, breaking musical concepts down into smaller activities and allowing them to explore. If you are paying close attention, they tell you when they have had enough, and you need to move on. If they don't feel like singing, we can do many other musical activities.

Inter Nos: Tell us about your Dad. He seems like a great guy! How did he inspire The Full Voice? How did you come up with the name The Full Voice?

NL: My dad is the reason I became a singer. He was a professional singer in the 60's. Music was his passion. He loved to entertain and sing. He encouraged me as a kid, and we performed together. Although you could say that my dad was a "stage Dad," he made sure I had great voice teachers, and he

was very respectful of them. Maybe this is why I don't have issues with Moms and Dads who are heavily involved with their kids. He has always supported my music career, and I am thankful that he inspired and encouraged me to pursue what I love.

My father is also a hard working, no nonsense business man with an entrepreneurial mindset. In my early days of teaching, I was always complaining about how difficult it was to teach, and he told me to stop complaining, fix the problem, or find another job. I think my parents being self-employed business people for most of their lives gave me the insight and courage to self-publish the *Full Voice Workbookss* and start Full Voice Music. I had several ideas for names for my workbooks, so I presented them to my students and let them choose. They all liked *Full Voice* the best.

Inter Nos: Your podcasts and videos are really helpful, even for teachers who work with teens and adult singers. I particularly liked the caution about not rushing through a lesson. Why is this especially important when you are working with children?

NL: Thank you! The *Full Voice* podcast is so well received, and we get positive feedback from voice teachers around the world. I am always so inspired by the guests I interview, and it brings together this fantastic community of music educators. Our resources are for teachers working with singers 5 to 16, but many of the teaching strategies can apply to all ages.

One of my Facebook Live videos was about **Lesson Pacing, Not Lesson Racing**. I think one of the inherent flaws of most experienced and inspired teachers is that we want to share ALL our knowledge ALL the time. I know I am very guilty of that. If we are not paying close attention, we can get wrapped up in our egos or just mindless habits and rush our students through a voice lesson. However, we need to observe our students and give them space to explore and discover at their own pace. Frequent review of the basics is essential for students of all levels and abilities. Mindfulness in the private teaching studio means being present, observing our students and teaching to their needs — no matter the age of the student.

Nikki Loney is a professional vocalist and Registered Music Teacher from Hamilton, Ontario Canada. She is an honors graduate of the Humber College Music Program. She works with professional and amateur vocalists ages 6 to 63, preparing them for examinations, post-secondary auditions, competitions and professional singing endeavors. Nikki has over twenty years of recording studio experience and her vocals have been featured on television and radio jingles, and commercial recording releases. Nikki Loney and Mim Adams are founders of TheFullVoice.com: Inspired Vocal Resources for Young Singers.