Most voice teachers teach by the cookie cutter method - a one size fits all approach where they give the same vocal exercises to every student who comes in the door, and they call this vocal technique. Most of these exercises are simply a passing on of the incorrect training they may have received along the way, whether from another teacher, or from a degree program, where most of the training is toward classical or “legit” vocal development and does not work well for commercial, popular, or musical theatre singing.

Unfortunately, this hit or miss approach only works for a few of their students; the rest are judged to be untalented, and the student is made to feel that it is their fault their voices are not improving, rather than the misguided approach being taken by their teacher.

Every person who walks into my Sing Like a Star vocal studio has individual characteristics and traits, as a person, and in their vocal habits. These are based on past training (good or bad), self teaching and imitation of other singers, and the now unconscious muscular reactions that result from these prior experiences.

Even though each voice is unique, all singers do tend to fall into certain basic categories:

1. Untrained voices: these voices are breathy and weak. Usually children fall into this category. The breathiness happens because the vocal folds have not been trained to adduct, or come together. Sometimes these singers "flip" (yodel) because they can't maintain the focusing strength in the vocal cords. They usually need to start by finding and developing a good lower register, (chest voice), by singing with more energy and sound. Vocal development over time is key here, as the voice will take time to develop.

2. Chest pushers: this includes many musical theatre singers, gospel, and rock vocalists. These singers have developed their lower register, or chest voice (which is great) but they tend to "hang on" to the chest voice when they are
trying to sing higher notes. They sound like they are yelling on high notes, they often crack, and there is a lot of tension visible in the neck. These singers require an approach that will take some of the weight off the voice, a little earlier than they are used to, but will allow them to stay connected as they go much higher. This is called mix.

3. Classical singers who want to sing pop: These singers may have a more developed upper register in a more "legitimate" style, but not much in the way of a chest voice, if they are female. I get a lot of these people, who always wanted to sing popular music, but the only voice teachers they could find were classical teachers. These singers want a more "edgy" and commercial vocal sound, which they will find as we develop their mix.

I believe that if a person can match pitch fairly well, the rest is up to me! I tell the students that their job is just to practice the specifically designed exercises given to them, and to expect a result, because there IS a plan! I design specific lesson plans based on each student's vocal type, rather than a "one size fits all" series of exercises.

Regarding pitch matching: If a person really wants to sing, but cannot match pitch, it is still possible for them to learn. Sometimes these folks have not had the benefit of music classes in school, have never sung in a church choir, or just do not have a musical ear. Pitch challenged students require a great deal more patience (theirs and mine) and it may take them longer to achieve what other students do more easily, but I believe anyone can learn. We just have to vocalize at a more basic level for awhile, and we work on ear training- the recognition of intervals in music.

Every voice can be said to be functioning well, or not well, based on the behavior of the vocal cords (or more properly, vocal folds) and how they function particularly when the student is ascending in pitch from the bottom of the voice (chest) to the upper register (head). If the vocal cords are functioning properly, there is a process of giving up vocal weight upon ascension in pitch, without entirely letting go of what I like to call “appropriate cord adduction”. It enables the student to make a smooth transition from the lower register (chest voice) into the upper register (head or mix) without straining, and also without disconnecting into an airy and breathy falsetto like sound.

This is a coordination that in most cases, must be trained into the voice by good vocal technique. Very few singers are able to figure out how to do this on their own, largely because of our inability to really hear what we sound like, while we are in the process of making sounds, and because the vocal cords usually need to be developed in certain ways to achieve this coordination.

Students should be aware that most people out there claiming to be voice
teachers are really voice destroyers. They may have sung (well or not so well) at some point, they may have a degree, they may be teaching at a “music school”, but unless they have a deep and solidly based understanding of how to teach “mix”, you are in trouble!

90% of the bad teaching out there falls into two categories: The “chest pusher” or “belt” camp, and the “sing only in your head voice” camp.

In the “push your chest voice higher” camp, students are taught to gain a few extra notes in their chest voice, by pushing and yelling. This is the approach you see in almost every local theatre production of Annie, for example.

In the “sing only in your head voice” camp, the chest voice is avoided completely and students vocalize only in their upper voice, or “legit” sound, bringing that coordination all the way down into the chest register. The vocal quality does not work for pop, musical theatre, country, rock, or gospel singing because it is very airy and weak, particularly on the bottom of the range. Although, not commonly known, this approach can be damaging (though not as bad as the yelling in chest approach), because the vocal mechanism is unbalanced, and blowing air over un-adducted (open) vocal cords is unhealthy for them.

Good vocal training is based on a solid understanding of vocal bridges; where they occur in the voice, and how to provide remedial exercises that help a student negotiate those troublesome areas smoothly and strongly. This is a very specialized area of vocal study that teachers do not receive in degree programs, because it is not taught in universities, unfortunately.

The most effective and healthy approach to singing is encapsulated in one word-
MIX!

In future blogs I will discuss how the mix voice is developed.