

Teaching Kids to Sing

by Kenneth H. Phillips
Schirmer Books, New York 1996



**Reviewed by
David Thaxton**

It is a priceless, irreplaceable instrument of unrivaled expressive power and complexity. Although its sound production module is scarcely larger than a walnut, it can fill a cathedral with sound and shatter a wine goblet at close range. One might expect such an instrument to be owned solely by an elite few with years of training but, rather, nearly every human possesses it from birth. You'd expect the voice to be studied, researched and written about extensively—and it is. However, in *Teaching Kids to Sing*, Kenneth Phillips has compiled a text that fills an important, yet often overlooked niche—the study of the developing voice in young children.

Like other vocal texts, *Teaching Kids to Sing* adequately covers appropriate vocal techniques for adolescents and adults, as well as vocal anatomy and health. However, Phillips also devotes much thought and study of the elementary level voice. He begins from the simple premise that young children can and should be taught proper vocal technique and that the act of singing is a psychomotor process that involves many complex relationships of mental control over physiological processes. Thus, the assumption that children can produce a cleanly coordinated singing voice automatically is a dubious one.

After devoting early chapters to how psychomotor processes lead to the emerging voice, and to appropriate ranges and tessitura for children's voices at different levels of their development, Phillips delves into outlines of the five components of vocal technique: respiration, phonation, resonant tone produc-

tion, diction and expression. Within each of these chapters, the author thoroughly explores the underlying physiology, followed by a series of leveled exercises designed to initiate and reinforce optimal execution of the technique. It is within these 90 exercises that the text asserts its unique utility. If children systematically learn these techniques in warm-ups and other class activities throughout their elementary music experiences, they enter middle and high school with a background of vocal techniques that can be built upon by choral and voice teachers. More importantly, they move on with the ability to sing skillfully and healthfully.

To accompany the text, Phillips has put together supplemental materials that may be of interest, including a video series and a binder of cards containing each of the 90 exercises. Unfortunately, it appears that the vocalize cards are unavailable for purchase, a situation that is hopefully temporary. While they contain the same information as the book, they are organized in order of increasing difficulty in a package that is more user-friendly than the exercises spread throughout the book. However, it

would be quite feasible to extract them for classroom and rehearsal use. They are as beneficial as they are well designed—practical steps to building quality vocal technique.

Teaching Kids to Sing is primarily designed as a text for vocal methods courses, and would be a strong choice for such. However, it is a book with interesting philosophical and historical points combined with eminently practical techniques that would serve anyone who works with young children's voices well. It goes a long way toward giving children the skills to develop a lifetime of musicianship on their original instrument.

