

# Susan Davies

## Soprano

[www.susandaviesmusic.com](http://www.susandaviesmusic.com)

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### **Teaching Philosophy: exploration, empowerment, community**

Voice lessons provide a safe, supportive, challenging, and kindly critical environment for students to experiment with their voices and uncover unknown potential. I believe that anybody who wants to learn to sing or speak expressively will be able to build a functional technique that aligns with their goals. Based on reciprocal engagement between student and teacher, my approach combines evidence-based pedagogy and somatic learning to guide students to self-discovery and artistic empowerment.

### **Exploration**

In my early years of voice training, I found myself bound up by the arbitrary parameters of perfection. For years, I practiced the “right” things in the exact way that I “should,” but instead of feeling empowered, I ended up completely disconnected from my body, afraid to make mistakes, and, eventually, unable to articulate what I loved about singing. Thankfully, I finally connected with teachers, mentors, and a broader community of artists who encouraged me to approach singing as play. Over time, I discovered how critical it is to view singing as exploration. No two instruments are the same, so there can't be a one-size-fits-all approach to learning to sing. Trying to fit ourselves into a box only robs us of our unique voice.

While it's easy to be our own harshest critic and to focus on what we *can't* do vocally and artistically, I encourage my students first to identify their strengths. We use these strengths as a jumping off point in lessons from which to build a clear intellectual and kinesthetic understanding of their instrument. I steer clear of vague descriptors like *good, bad, right*, and

*wrong* and challenge students to reexamine their own descriptive language when it comes to evaluating their voices. Armed with a broad vocabulary, students can more deeply explore the capacity of their voices—with full permission to experiment, make mistakes, and deviate from the “correct” way—while having the framework to articulate their individual experiences. This allows them to stay present with their own voice, rather than drift towards comparison or judgment.

Very rarely do students simply stand and sing for an entire lesson. In order to explore the unknown, we must do the unexpected! I regularly incorporate movement and props (such as yoga balls, stretchy bands, and straws) in lessons to help students tap into new sensations which they can later evaluate and use as information when moving forward. Most importantly, I encourage two-way conversation and never look for “right” answers from students—only observations and questions which we can then explore. Through this kind of curiosity and play, we address technical, dramatic, and stylistic elements of vocal use. It's much easier to find vocal freedom, efficiency, and dependability while having fun than while being self-judgmental. This kind of exploration leads to self-discovery, which naturally cultivates a sense of empowerment.

## Empowerment

When students have a thorough understanding of their instrument, they are able to self-assess and self-direct exploration outside of lessons. This independence and self-trust is, ultimately, my goal for every student. Therefore, I believe that every singer should have a functional knowledge of the anatomy and physiology of their instrument, which will offer an evidence-based approach to vocal growth.

I use my background in vocal pedagogy and Body Mapping to help students uncover the key features of the voice (using pictures, verbal descriptions, and external representations) and their relevance to expressive vocalism. I use a broad-to-narrow approach in teaching, often beginning with whole-body concepts (for example, balance, movement of the breathing structures) before delving into finer understanding of resonance, articulation, etc. While a student is building the mental map of their instrument, I find it productive to begin with parts of the instrument which can be easily seen and felt. I adapt my language to suit each student, so that I can help make the unseen attainable and the physiology clear so that it can be utilized.

I'm committed to considering my students' goals and will work with them to choose repertoire that aligns with those goals. I encourage my students to sing a wide variety of repertoire to foster technical growth and stimulate curiosity. Cross-training enriches a singer's technique, widens students' artistic palettes, and makes for well-rounded musicians. I guide students into finding personal connection with their songs so that they take the lead on acting and performance choices. Identifying personal relevance in combination with strength-based singing offers students ownership over their vocal and artistic choices. Intellectual preparation and healthy, functional technique allow for freedom and spontaneity in performance. This allows students to sing not only with great confidence, but also with great joy.

## Community

Singing is a continuous discovery of self and a wonderful medium through which to explore possibilities and push boundaries. As singers discover their most authentic and expressive sounds, it is common to feel vulnerable or even alone in the process. In my experience as a singer and educator, vocal exploration and empowerment is enhanced by a strong sense of community. From musical collaborations to sharing one's struggles and successes with other singers, community serves to uplift individuals' experiences and assure singers that they are not alone in the journey.

In my teaching, community begins in the voice studio, where students are active participants in their vocal development. Lessons are a partnership where the teacher serves as a guide, not an absolute authority. Outside of the formal lesson time, I encourage students to engage with other singing opportunities both in and out of the studio: theater productions, studio classes, workshops, collaborative performances, open mic nights. Even informal chats, articles, and podcasts can strengthen relationships between singers and reinforce individuals' work. Studio classes—where singers perform for one another and receive feedback from me in front of the group—are an especially helpful way for students to learn from one another at various stages of the learning process.

While so much of the music industry can be cutthroat, subjective, and judgmental, it is my belief that artists are stronger when they raise each other up. The only limit to creative

possibility is imagination. When we work together as performers, educators, and lifelong learners, there is no limit to what we can achieve.