

classroom are the students. We teach them about life, and we do it through choral music.

If the ever-important component of meaningful teacher/student interaction is lacking in a modern school with all the latest features of building design, curricula, and technology, but is present in a third world country with no educational materials beyond a shade tree and a stick in the dirt as a dry erase board, I'm betting on the shade tree environment as the more significant school experience for the students.

Teachers must not allow themselves to be distracted from "the main thing" of teaching while consideration is directed at other issues in education. This requires constant vigilance. I'm confident that career music educators now in their first decade of teaching will have discovered new and seemingly insurmountable professional challenges by the time they reach their third decade, but the central focus of their business, teaching/nurturing students, will not have changed.

Important note: The story about a short registration line being the determining factor in my selection of a college major was completely fabricated. The fire and passion for the choral art was ignited in me when I was in the ninth grade. I knew what my major was going to be long before I went to college. I became a choral teacher because of a particular choral teacher, and I know it's the same for most of us.

Choral teachers may have few students follow them into the profession, but far more lives are influenced through daily meaningful interaction between a caring and highly competent teacher and his/her students. Yes, we must continue the pursuit of pedagogical perfection, but we must not stop there. Don't you agree?

Be aware: never underestimate the scope of a teacher's influence on his/her students.



Where Have All the Altos Gone?

by

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I loved my fifth and sixth grade music teacher, Mrs. Richardson. She was energetic and passionate about music, and she always seemed to pick songs I loved singing. Truly, I can still sing many of the songs she taught us, word for word, note for note.

She frequently told us what a good class of singers we were and that we were among the best two groups she had worked with in her entire career. I thrived on the idea of beating the other group and winning first place in Mrs. Richardson's heart. She gave us treats when we behaved, reprimanded us when we deserved it, dressed in special sparkly sequin outfits for concerts, and ignited an eternal flame of passion for singing in me.

As my sixth grade teacher, Mrs. Richardson was the first person who labeled me as an alto. Since I was studying piano, I could read music and hold a harmony part (basic requirements for being an alto), but I also loved singing low. I wrinkled my nose at notes that went above the second space on the staff and protested that they were too high.

This did not really make much sense to my mother, a soprano, or my father, a tenor. I think this preference for being an alto was simply a sign of the times. It was the 1970's and, contrary to popular generalizations, the decade was not all disco music, bell-bottom pants, self-portrait-of-the-composer-and-denim-covered music, and Ruth Artman stick-figure choreography.

It was also the decade of the alto, a time when Karen Carpenter, Anne Murray, and Toni Tennille were celebrated as goddesses of the airwaves. Like their low-voiced predecessors Patsy Cline and Peggy Lee, these women gave us rich, low melodies with an open, warm sound that as young singers, we loved and imitated. What Muskrat Love didn't teach me about the birds and the bees, it taught me about alto tone.

Any girl worth her salt could heartily sing along with *Rainy Days and Mondays* or *I Won't Last a Day Without You*. But where have all the altos gone? Turn on the radio today and you are doing well to find an actual melody, much less singing tone worth emulating. The country singers are whining through their noses, the R & B singers are embellishing so much that melody is indefinable, and pop singers

are so distorted by electronics that I'm not sure any of them can actually match pitch.

Singers do not come to us as blank slates upon which to write. Just ask any group of kids to sing Happy Birthday or Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer and you will get a big dose of what vocal habits are already built into their muscles. Family and cultural experiences play into singers' tendencies and preferences, ability to match pitch, and certainly the ability to hear a harmony part.

As we begin the formal training of our singers—no matter what their ages, we do not begin with students who are in the same category as those who come to the band director as beginners. He/she instructs them on how to put the instruments to their lips for the first time. A band director builds a player's concepts and habits from day one. However, we take young singers whose vocal sounds are already formed through listening to their I-pods for years. Our singers' models for listening are often far from what we want in healthy voice production.

No matter what age you teach, your goal should be to help develop healthy singers – period. Since many of us leave college with little or no vocal pedagogy other than what we learn in our private voice lessons, our preferences and knowledge (or lack thereof) can hamper our singers if we are not mindful of our own shortcomings.

Since I was labeled an alto at a young age, I was stuck singing in the bottom range of my voice. I did not learn to use my head voice efficiently until I was in my late teens. So, as a card-carrying member of the Hairy-Chested Alto Club, I have always worked to make sure that my preference for ledger lines below the staff doesn't keep me from teaching a healthy approach to use of the head voice all the way down through the lower range.

Bringing the head voice downward on descending patterns helps teach singers to negotiate their middle range without bringing the chest voice up too high. However, at the bottom of a singer's range, warmth, openness, and a focused sound can occur when the air continues to flow, the tongue stays forward, the soft palate stays lifted, and the vocal mechanism remains unencumbered by tension.

Chest voice is not evil, and singing "low" needs to be developed and taught. Teaching singers to use only one part of their voice efficiently is depriving them of their full potential and, ultimately, what they can achieve with their voices over a lifetime of singing.

Teaching all singers about the use of their voices in all registers is the key to healthy development, no matter what the ages of the singers. Your kids can be stretched at both ends of the vocal range through exercises that will develop flexibility, warmth, vibrancy, and ease of register shifts.

During my undergraduate studies, I was introduced to the work

of Frauke Hasseman, longtime assistant director at Westminster Choir College. I found her exercises for voices to be extremely helpful. With Wilhelm Ehmann, she co-authored *Voice Building for Choirs*, a handy paperback full of vocalises for choirs.

In addition, I am grateful to James Jordan for his work in organizing more of her ideas into the book, *Group Vocal Technique*. While there are dozens of books on the subject of vocal pedagogy, this particular book gives choral directors practical information and vocalises to assist in the teaching of healthy singing.

Approaching the first five to ten minutes of a choral rehearsal as a group voice lesson will develop our singers far better than meaningless repetitive warm-ups. Give serious thought to what you can accomplish in that time to develop your singers' vocal range and technique.

Developing and encouraging singing in all voice ranges draws a more complete picture on the mental slate of our singers rather than a narrow tunnel of vocal limitation. As teachers, we should create a sense of pride about singing any part – not just first soprano or tenor. Help each singer celebrate his or her entire voice, not just the high notes!

ALTOS RULE!



Friends

Forgiving
Reassuring
Interesting
Empathetic
Nice
Devoted
Sincere
