

A Choral Director's First Task

by

Charles Chapman
Wagoner, OK

(Reprinted with permission of SWACDA *Common Times*, Vol 27, No 3 Spring 2009)

Each year I am fortunate to be asked to judge many choral contests. I have enjoyed this important educational exercise for more years than most of you would believe. I hear marvelous choirs so well taught that their performances often touch me deeply. But I also hear many choirs who have been well rehearsed in correct pitches, dynamic effects, and even style, yet who have apparently never been told that they cannot sing a good choral ensemble tone with the acoustic/vocal shapes they currently use. In my opinion, loud/soft contrasts and phrasing nuance cannot overcome, excuse, or mask ugly singing tone.

The *laissez faire* style of teaching in regard to tone seems to me to omit the second, and most important, step of the first day of a choir's rehearsal. The basics of breathing technique probably should be the first thing we teachers address, along with posture. Breathing is important, and the techniques must be pursued repeatedly, sort of like guerrilla warfare. But that vital element is not the end of vocal pedagogy—the breath is already working.

Talking incessantly only about breathing is the first refuge of the vocal/choral clinician or teacher who doesn't know what else to say—and I believe there are many of them! In clinics we often accept breath pedagogy overkill as being somehow pure teaching. We nod seriously at such comments as "Until the breath is correct, I don't let them sing songs." I'll talk about the breathing cult in a later column.

I am convinced that many of our choral conductors have too little information about how the human vocal tract can be trained (altered) to produce sounds different from those so-called "natural" sounds the students bring to class the first day of the year. We have all attended many "Emperor's New Clothes" placement clinics where the clinician will move singers within the chorus to "correct" blend or balance problems. The clinician moves the singers then looks triumphantly and expectantly at the seated conventioners, who usually dutifully smile at each other and say, "Oh, that is SO much better." I believe that if Phyllis sings too bright a tone for good choral blend, moving her some place different makes little difference in the ensemble's sound. She still sings too brightly and that fact militates against good choral blend.

Excellent soloistic tone is not always good choral tone. Singers need to learn how to change the way they sing to conform to the

desired choral unison. This training will NOT hurt their solo techniques. (Private teachers—relax!) The human voice is infinitely flexible for those with healthy instruments.

A good friend of mine had a big operatic voice from the time of puberty. Both in high school and throughout most of her university training, she was not allowed to sing in choral groups. Finally, a university conductor taught her to change her natural production to blend and balance with the other singers. She was overjoyed. She thought there was something wrong with her voice, when she should have been taught to sing differently but still in a healthy manner while in choir.

This need to change the quality of the singing tone is more crucial to small and medium-sized choirs with fewer professional voices than it is to larger or strictly adult professional singers. Training has a way, for most of us, of leavening aberrant vocal characteristics that might hurt choral ensemble singing. Volunteer church choirs are the best example of this. Volunteer, often geriatric, tone is trainable, but the process is difficult. Most church choir directors seem just to leave it alone or expel the problems.

What exactly do we choral directors have to change about singers' voices? The answer is to change the physical shapes of most of the vocal resonators. This means changing the vocal tract, beginning just above the vocal folds—the epi-larynx, a term coined by the famous laryngologist, Ingo Titze—and continuing through the upper throat, the mouth (jaw), and the lips.

Unfortunately, it seems that most of our Southwestern Division speech dialects are uttered through these spaces in their most collapsed configuration. Many of the untrained singers in SWACDA could probably move immediately into successful careers in ventriloquism! Of the areas named above, the epi-larynx is most crucial and the most ignored.

The quality of a musical tone is determined by two physical characteristics, the wave form generated by the vibrator and the shape(s) into which this wave form progresses. This dictum also includes the acoustical characteristics of the hall into which the choral tone moves, which is a tertiary resonator (or damper) for all sound.

Altering vocal fold action requires careful, mostly indirect, training (yet another long discussion). This process is usually protracted. The choral conductor is, in most cases, better served by altering resonator shapes, the changes of which are mostly visible, mostly directly adjustable, and may even be silently cued during performance, when [o] shapes begun by singers begin to turn into smiles.

Shape is even more important for those conductors who have chosen ruthlessly straight (non-vibrato) tone production. (yet another article?) Straight tone often tunes well and is very controlled, but so-

pranos and tenors singing in upper ranges without modification of the vocal tract shapes often emit sounds that will kill birds! If the straight tone is not well-tuned, it can be an unpleasant listening experience.

Straight tone is most at home in reverberant rooms. The reverb tends to modify some of the inherent siren effect of a tight, straight, high "A." I believe the rise of popularity of British conductors as clinicians in the United States is responsible for the fad of singing everything, even Brahms, with straight tone. If straight tone is not mitigated at forte levels and in higher ranges, it is not pretty—my opinion, of course.

There isn't room in this article for a complete list of what must be done to every singer to obtain optimum blend and balance in a choir. I urge you to listen objectively to recordings and to watch DVD's of your groups. Objectify the process. Pretend the recordings are performances of your ensemble's best competitor. What can you say about the tone of your choir that is negative, yet true? In our division, there is rarely a singer with a good natural voice. "Natural" is either country-western caterwauling, gospel shouting, or white, insipid tone.

Teach your choir singers to sing vowels alike. Teach them first to sing a well-shaped [o]. Look at how many of them aren't even rounding their lips! Then go from there. Be creative. Read in depth about the voice, vocal pedagogy, and choral pedagogy. Take voice lessons. Your investment of time will be worth it.

