

## The Developing Male Voice: Instilling Confidence in the Young Male Singer

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**T**he qualities often associated with boychoirs and the sound of a young boy's singing voice are ones of beauty, transcendence, and etherealism. The timbre of a confident boy singer possesses both innocence and mastery, because he must demonstrate confident use of a very delicate instrument, often against a backdrop of significant musical maturity.

Conversely, when describing the tone of a mature male voice or men's chorus, the adjectives that come to mind are also typically quite desirable—strong, full, rich, and vibrant. College glee clubs, barbershop choruses, and the popularity of groups like Cantus, Chanticleer, and the King's Singers contribute to the sense of rich sonorities we associate with mature male singers.

While the relationship between these two may not be immediately recognized in terms of range, standards, timbres, or repertoire, both are treasured mediums of musical expression. However, attention must be paid to the connection between them, especially for those boys who are beginning, working through, or mastering the transition.

As choral directors, we know that the journey from the unchanged to changed voice is filled with all sorts of traps, turns, and curves that prove quite difficult in the choral rehearsal setting. More importantly, the way in which we deal with these difficulties—both real and those perceived by the chorister—can have an impact and long-lasting effect on the confidence, emotions, and vocal health of young males whose psyches are almost as delicate and unpredictable as their changing voices. It is generally agreed that the antiquated method of telling boys to stop singing at the voice “break,” only to pick it up again once his voice has finished changing, is an outdated way of avoiding a problem rather than working through it. Though this approach does keep some ties to avoiding laryngeal or other physiological problems, we are now well-equipped to help our boys through this stage, if we can keep their confidence high through these uncertain times. Moreover, if we can equip these boys to sing through the voice change in a healthful way, we will be preparing them to enjoy a lifelong pursuit of healthy singing. Standard texts in the field now devote entire chapters to the adolescent voice and often, more specifically, the changing male voice. The writings of Duncan McKenzie<sup>1</sup>, Don Collins<sup>2</sup>, and John Cooksey<sup>3</sup> have provided a solid foundation to help choir directors navigate the concerns surrounding the changing voice. More recent scholarship has imparted an explosion of resources for these choristers, from Ingo Titz's accessible explorations of vocal anatomy and physiology<sup>4</sup> to Terry Barham's collection<sup>5</sup> of approaches and rehearsal techniques for this age group. Publishers such as Cambiata Press and Bri-Lee Music have specialized in compositions and arrangements that suit the limited ranges, vocal registrations, and voice classifications of these singers. Despite this wealth of informative resources, the positive inclusion and development of male singers through the adolescent voice change continues to be a struggle for many choral directors.

While choices in literature, pedagogy, voice classification, and other related musical factors may continue to make this fuzzy picture come into focus, it is the confidence of each individual singer which must be carefully considered and consistently encouraged.

This large topic has been compartmentalized into four areas (discussed below) in which encouragement from the director should be maintained in order to instill an intrinsic confidence in young male singers.

These categories are not only for the choral director to remain sensitive to, but also for each singer to absorb and make his own, so that he can measure his progress in each area, and enjoy its resulting success. This is all done with an aim to keep boys singing through the voice change and contributing to the health and success of their choral ensembles.

### ***Confidence in the Individual Nature of the Voice Change***

The voice change can pose a dramatic obstacle not only in a boy's singing habits, but also in his social perception and his formative identity. The underlying principle in dealing with this vocal transition is to make sure boys understand that the voice change is a process, and not an instance.

For some, noticeable changes can be detected at ten years old, while some twelve year olds may not yet exhibit any discernable change in speaking or singing ranges<sup>6</sup>. Additionally, these changes might be present in a boy's speaking voice, but he does not yet demonstrate a significant change in the singing voice. Though it may seem like it for some boys, the voice does not change overnight, and the process that all males go through is different and unique for each individual. In addition to the starting age being different, the length of each stage of the voice change, or the rate of progression through the process, also varies from one individual to the next.

Just as it is natural to measure a boy's maturity by his physical development, so too are comparisons formed based on speaking and singing ranges. The pressure of an adolescent male to be the tallest, the fastest, the smartest, or the most popular is predicated on being viewed as older or more mature. Likewise, just as a boy tries to demonstrate a false sense of maturity by seeming taller or more developed physically, he might also try to sound older by falsely speaking low, pushing too much of the heavier chest voice into higher parts of his range, or outright refusing to sing in what is a perfectly accessible upper part of his range. It is unhealthy for a boy to sing or consistently speak in this manner, and so we must build up each boy's confidence in his natural maturation process. On this topic, John Kincaid of Simmons Middle School (AL) writes:

Without the proper encouragement at his stage, many boys (and some teachers) may decide that they "can't sing" or are "tone deaf," and end their involvement in music. What are some things that we can do to help our young men through this time of change and keep them strong as singers? Lots. The boys need to know that what is going on is normal and expected, and is just a part of developing.<sup>7</sup>

Strive to maintain an environment that is a safe place to sing and experiment with the voice. The sooner that each of the boys realizes that the "snap, crackle, and pop" of the voice change is something that either has happened, is happening, or will happen to everyone in the room, the more they will be willing to risk and try all of those things (vocalizes, non-musical sounds, etc.), which the director has planned to help them sing through the change.

### ***Confidence in Vocal Registration and Range***

Registration is an issue that is dealt with at all levels of singing. The confidence that we can produce a certain pitch is important, but our confidence in the quality of the sound we produce, as a result of the mixture of head voice, chest voice, resonating space, etc., is crucial. Nearly every work on this subject emphasizes a "topdown" approach, meaning that the lighter, brighter qualities of the head voice should be brought downward into the developing chest voice. This is not range specific, as the goal is to simply identify and strengthen the lighter, more blendable tone, and to bring these qualities into the lower range in order to relieve as much stress as possible on the vocal process and to optimize breath management. Gaining confidence in this area is achieved by exploring with the boys a series of warm-ups and vocalises that maintain the brilliance of the upper range, while sensitively exploring the newer bottom part of the range.

With enough practice, singers will be able to navigate across these registers with little to no discernable strain or stress. Terry Barham<sup>8</sup> identifies categories of warm-ups that are helpful in this respect. These include several unpitched vocalises such as yawns, sighs, and siren noises and small, compact descending passages, which help to sensitively bring the top part of the voice down through the *passaggio*. Exercises such as these, especially those that aren't attached to repertoire, are helpful, because the boys will begin to gain for themselves a sense of accomplishment and confidence as they navigate these ranges and shifts more smoothly.

Another important aspect in this area is to make sure that the idea of head tone or head voice is not first addressed only when the voice change starts to become an issue. Where possible, make younger treble voices who are unaffected by the onset of the voice change aware of registers (though relatively limited) within their own voices. The earlier that a boy is thinking in terms of registration and consistently demonstrating healthy tone placement, the easier it will be for him when the change in his vocal range first becomes problematic.

### ***Confidence to Avoid Unnecessary Effort***

One of the biggest problems with boys in various stages of the voice change is the exertion of too much effort. The inconsistency of the vocal mechanism often moves boys to strive for a false sense of control through over-extension and misuse of their neck and jaw muscles. This is easily seen in a middle school-age chorus, where chins are jutting into the air on high pitches, and brought down to shoulder level on more comfortable notes. Such efforts result in unnecessary and typically detrimental tension. This also causes the muscles surrounding the vocal mechanism to tire more quickly, worsening the already tricky problem of vocal control due to the voice change.

So many activities in life and in school require that boys work hard and do things to become better. Society tells them they should study harder or practice more intensely, quite often in a spirit of competition. While male singers should definitely work hard to perfect their craft, this principle does not necessarily apply in the area of vocal production. The voice—and particularly the changing voice—works best when it is allowed to operate freely, apart from any constricting or limiting forces. A

maximized air stream which supports a relaxed, uninhibited vocal process is crucial to success with this age group. Boys need to experience the feeling of freedom and relaxation as it applies to the voice, and be able to recall this feeling daily so as to limit tension, strain, fatigue, and the possibility of long-term damage.

Ensure that boys are encouraged to sing freely and openly with as little strain or stress as possible. Using the unpitched exercises described above is key in this area. Boys need to remove the element of matching exact pitches in order to experiment freely with producing light, unforced sounds. Instead of encouraging that boys make things happen vocally, encourage an attitude of letting things happen.

### **Confidence in Their Role and Contribution**

Despite his director's best efforts, the voice change will still likely provide the young male singer with moments of frustration and disappointment. Boys who take pride in their work and effort may feel as though their role in the choir or contribution to the ensemble has been compromised, and feelings of inadequacy may result. This prospect is a delicate state, because, despite their rough exterior, the adolescent boy's desire to seek approval extends to his director and others in his section. Continually hesitant performance may turn the boy away from singing altogether. Additionally, boys who are frustrated with their role may exhibit uncooperative behavior or become discipline problems.

There are strategies that the director can do to help the young male singer in this area. Modifying or writing new vocal parts, changing original keys, or moving between different voice parts are isolated ways that may help. However, do not let the singer know you are doing this because of him. Simply say that more help is needed on a part that happens to fall within his comfortable range. Additionally, praise as much as possible those things that the boys can contribute despite pitch uncertainty. These boys can provide special attention to diction, phrasing, or articulation.

No matter how small or limited a boy's ability to contribute to the group, he should be praised for his work and gain a feeling of confidence in his efforts despite a temporarily modified role. As we work to produce wonderful choirs, we must also value our role in producing young men who are comfortable with their own vocal ability, and confidently prepared for a lifetime of music-making. Puberty and adolescence are difficult enough for children, and the problems encountered during the male voice change can add significantly to this awkward time. Navigating them through the tricky waters of the voice change with an end result of confident, healthy singing should remain a critical part of conducting and teaching.

### **NOTES**

1 McKenzie, Duncan. *Training the Boy's Changing Voice*. Rutgers University Press, 1956.

2 See the series of "Changing Voice" articles written and edited by Collins in the *Choral Journal* 28, October 1987 as well as "The Cambiata Concept: More than Just About Changing Voices," *Choral Journal* 23 (December 1982). Also, the chapters on working with adolescent and changing voices in Collins' *Teaching Choral Music* (Prentice Hall, 1999) are invaluable.

3 Cooksey, John. *Working with Adolescent Voices*. Concordia, 1999. Also see Cooksey's "The Development of a Contemporary, Eclectic Theory for the Training and Cultivation of the Junior High School Male Changing Voice" (four parts), *Choral Journal* 18, October 1977 – January 1978.

4 Titze, Ingo. "Critical Periods of Vocal Change: Puberty." *NATS Journal*, January/February 1993.

5 Barham, Terry J. *Strategies for Teaching Junior High and Middle School Male Singers: Master Teachers Speak*. Santa Barbara Music Publishing, 2001.

6 Titze, Figure 2.

7 Kincaid, John. "Someone Moved My Furniture! Strategies for Dealing with Male Voice Change." *REPRISE: Alabama ACDA Newsletter*, Fall 2005.

8 Barham, 35–48.