Teaching Vocal Technique in the Choral Rehearsal

By Joy Hirokawa

As choir directors of young singers, we often find that we are the only instructors of vocal technique that our singers may have. We bear the responsibility to give them the very best in instruction so that they can become lifelong singers with healthy vocal technique. So, where to begin? The first requirement is to have a thorough knowledge of the vocal capabilities of the singers in front of you. A young singer who has received quality instruction for a number of years may, for example, be vastly ahead of an older, inexperienced singer in terms of understanding vocal technique. The “Singing Voice Development Measure” developed by Joanne Rutkowski & Martha Snell Miller (Figure 1) names and describes the various stages young singers go through while acquiring control and facility of the singing voice. This descriptive tool may help the choral director more accurately identify the stage of vocal development of young singers.

Additionally, the physical maturation of the vocal mechanism must

Figure 1. Singing Voice Development Measure

1  “Pre-singer” does not sing but chants the song text.

1.5 “Inconsistent Speaking Range Singer” sometimes chants, sometimes sustains tones and exhibits some sensitivity to pitch but remains in the speaking voice range (usually A₃ to C₄).

2  “Speaking Range Singer” sustains tones and exhibits some sensitivity to pitch but remains in the speaking voice range (usually A₃ to C₄).

2.5 “Inconsistent Limited Range Singer” wavers between speaking and singing voice and uses a limited range when in singing voice (usually up to F₄).

3  “Limited Range Singer” exhibits consistent use of limited singing range (usually D₄ to F₄).

3.5 “Inconsistent Initial Range Singer” sometimes only exhibits use of limited singing range, but other times exhibits use of initial singing range (usually D₄ to A₄).

4  “Initial Range Singer” exhibits consistent use of initial singing range (usually D₄ to A₄).

4.5 “Inconsistent Singer” sometimes only exhibits use of initial singing range, but other times exhibits use of extended singing range (sings beyond the register lift: B₄-flat and above).

5  “Singer” exhibits use of consistent extended singing range (sings beyond the register lift: B₄-flat and above).

be taken into consideration. Numerous studies have identified ranges in young children of around an octave that expand with maturation.\(^1\) Kenneth Phillips published a concise chart indicating the tessitura and ranges for elementary-aged children that is useful in understanding how the child voice physically develops (Figure 2).

These two tools can assist the choir director in identifying the vocal needs of the singers in terms of instruction for singing. For example, we might expect a fifth grader to be able to sing consistently in tune in the octave of D4 to D5 and comfortably extend outside that range periodically; however, we might also have a less experienced fifth grader who is an “Initial Range Singer” more comfortable in the D4 to A4 range. The conductor would need to differentiate instruction to address the needs of both singers, planning exercises to both strengthen the technique of the less experienced singer and to encourage continued growth in the more experienced singer.

Understanding both the singing development and physical maturation of your individual singers will also inform your next step, selecting repertoire appropriate to the identified abilities of the singers. Repertoire that is outside the physical abilities of the singer may create an unhealthy vocal situation in which the singer strains, forces the sound, develops poor singing habits, or worse, stops singing because they feel they do not sound good. Carefully selected repertoire will not only create opportunities to develop the child’s voice but also strengthen general flexibility and pitch accuracy.\(^2\)

Using our example singers, a song such as “Pretty Saro” arranged by Nancy Boone Allsbrook and Glenda Goodin\(^3\) would be an excellent choice. The main melody sits primarily between D4 and B4 with the third phrase lifting briefly up to E5, providing opportunities for the less experienced singer to learn how to negotiate that part of his range. For the more experienced singer, a descant that ranges from G4 to E5, sitting higher in tessitura and range, would provide more vocal challenge.

Through careful score study, analyze and identify the repertoire you have selected for vocal challenges then create a warm-up sequence to teach the vocal skills singers will need to negotiate the challenge when they encounter it in the context of the song. The warm-up then becomes instructional time for teaching the vocal technique required to successfully perform the repertoire. Begin with a sequential foundation that includes relaxation, mental focus, attention to body alignment, and instruction in breathing to prepare them for phonation. Teach them how to breathe, remembering that it is not just about the process of exhaling and inhaling but also actively engaging the breath when they sing. Vocal tone is generated in the quality of the breath, and yet this aspect of the warm-up is often glossed over quickly. Pay attention to areas of tension, particularly hidden areas like the tongue, a perennial problem for young singers in particular. Use a well-placed and well-supported sigh to release tension in the voice and reset the vocal mechanism at any time during the rehearsal.

For a song such as “Pretty Saro,” on-the-breath singing is essential to maintaining the flow of the line. A warm-up for this song that would set

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**First Grade**

Range: C4 – C5

Tessitura: D4 – A4

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**Second Grade**

Range: B3 – D5

Tessitura: D4 – B4

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**Third Grade**

Range: B3 – E5

Tessitura: D4 – C5

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**Fourth Grade**

Range: A3 – E5

Tessitura: D4 – D5

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**Fifth Grade**

Range: A4 – F5

Tessitura: D4 – D5

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**Sixth Grade**

Range: G3 – G5

Tessitura: C4 – D5

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**Figure 2. Range and Tessitura for Elementary-Aged Children**

the singers up for vocal success might include exhaling on an energized hiss with one hand gesturing forward from the lips to indicate the flow of air to a designated point across the room. First practice this over increasing numbers of counts (in a meter of three to match the song), beginning with six, then twelve, eighteen, and finally twenty-four counts. To then connect this gesture and airflow with the phrasing of the song, hiss and gesture while the melody is being played at the piano, with the gesture and breath paralleling the phrases.

Speech is a great tool to bridge into vocal production. Singers tend to be comfortable and not as threatened when speaking with an energized voice in an expressive manner. Use this as an avenue to engaging the breath in a healthy way. Be sure you are modeling the tension-free, energized, expressive vocal quality you are seeking to develop in your singers. With “Pretty Saro,” speaking the text in an energized “Julia Child” voice can be a fun approach for young singers. It also has the advantage of placing the voice in the upper register using a non-threatening approach. Applying the breath control that was just practiced and lifting into this humorous voice, the singers begin to make the connection between breath and vocal production.

As you move to actual singing, use core tone building warm-ups to reinforce on-the-breath, energized tonal production. Start with a comfortable pitch just below mid-range on long, sustained tones on an OO or EE vowel. Here we might take a page from our brass playing colleagues, who routinely begin their warm-ups playing sustained pitches. This not only warms up the vocal mechanism slowly and gently but also develops muscle control for consistent, on-the-breath singing. While younger singers might not find singing long tones very exciting, you can make it more interesting by teaching them to self-evaluate their own vocal mechanism. Using carefully structured questions, guide them so that they are able to figure out what they need to do as individual singers to make corrections. How do they feel vocally at this moment? Do they feel tightness? Can they identify where? Do they feel hoarse? Can they tell why? Encourage them to be self-aware of their own vocal mechanism and physical being. This will pay big dividends later as you move into your rehearsal. A piano accompaniment that is harmonically and rhythmically interesting will encourage more energized, independent singing rather than having the piano double the vocal line. Movement or gestures that free the body and support vocal production may also help free the voice. I have found the warm-ups in James Jordan’s *The Choral Warm-Up* particularly useful for this purpose, but there are numerous publications and resources available. What is important is that you seek exercises that fit your particular circumstances, repertoire, singer vocal needs, and

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Vowel shape is yet another aspect of vocal technique that will need to be carefully taught. For younger singers, warm-ups on OO and EE are easier to sing and focus the vowel. Open vowels such as AH are more difficult to focus and more difficult to unify as an ensemble. Stretch altos high and sopranos low within their comfort zone to develop tone across the registers. Asking them to add or subtract weight to the voice can be helpful with negotiating the registers. It also encourages them to explore a wider variety of vocal colors. Paint chips from your local hardware store are great tools for this purpose, particularly for your visual learners. Consider how different they will sound if they are thinking lemon yellow versus deep burgundy! These ideas can be very useful when singing certain multicultural musics or for stylistic or interpretive purposes.

Again considering “Pretty Saro,” the melody could be sung on “doo,” thinking “Julia Child” to create space in the sound and place it in the correct register and drawing phrases with arching gestures of the arm. A rose or mauve color chip might conjure a sense of the wistful mood of the song.

As you begin to then tackle the music in rehearsal, make sure to draw connections between the work you have done preparing them in the warm-up and the application of their newly acquired skills to the music they are learning. Do not assume that singers will make this connection on their own! As their teacher, it is your job to help them connect the dots. With each new selection being rehearsed, addressing the vocal challenges with a short reminder or exercise just prior to singing will help your singers understand the value of applying vocal technique to choral singing.

Most importantly (and often overlooked), create a safe environment in which singers can commit themselves to the music, allowing them to share their expressive selves—a risky venture for many because of the vulnerability so many feel and the fear of being judged. Strive to build a supportive community in which each singer feels they are making a significant contribution to the group. As Patricia St. John writes:

Through collective hard work, dedication to the music, and commitment to the process, students realize musical competence as confidence grows and relationships develop. The communal experience of music ensembles communicates the value of cooperative endeavors and the power of collaborative efforts. Making music together, participants create community, inviting best efforts and calling forth possibility. An interdependent learning environment characterized by collaboration...
invites, encourages, fosters, and includes each person's expression of innate musicality.  

How does this translate into developing vocal technique and tone in your choir? If singers do not trust their fellow choristers, they will be afraid to sing out and be expressive. When singers are committed to and trust one another, the shared experience of singing together instills confidence that allows them to take expressive risks they normally might not and to sing from the inside out. Not only will your singers be more energized in their singing, bringing more breath and support to the tone, they will also be more expressive. Use every opportunity to provide your singers the skills they need as vocalists. The benefits of doing so will compound with every rehearsal, and you will be creating lifelong singers in the process!

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NOTES

2 Ibid, 59.
3 Nancy Boone Allsbrook and Glenda Goodin, Pretty Saro (New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 2009).
6 Ibid, 111.

Student Chapter Updates

This month we are again pleased to present some excerpts from ACDA Student Chapter reports.

Florida Gulf Coast University

At our Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU) Student Chapter biweekly meetings, we discussed repertoire and teaching strategies, welcomed guest speakers, and organized events. At every meeting we sight-read a piece of choral music and watched a video of a choral ensemble performing. Throughout the year, our organization actively sought funding to attend the 2015 ACDA National Conference in Salt Lake City. We were successful in receiving funding from the FGCU student government, which covered the cost of flights and hotel rooms for four chapter members. Among the other fundraising activities, we carried out the second annual FGCU IDOL in November. Prior to this event, auditions were held to find the best singers and rappers at FGCU. Ten finalists, chosen by the show’s three judges, competed at the main show, and the audience voted for the winner, who received a free session in a professional recording studio and a Visa cash gift card. (20 members)

Hofstra University

(New York)

We had a busy and productive year! Throughout the year we invited four different elementary, middle school, and high school choir directors to come and speak to us. We also organized a conducting master class with Dr. David Fryling, our chapter advisor. This was a brand-new initiative put together by the president. Five students conducted a lab choir and received constructive criticism from Dr. Fryling. It was very successful, with twenty-five students in attendance. Four student members were able to attend the 2015 ACDA National Conference; it was the first time in at least three years that we had students represent our chapter at a national conference. We recently made contact with student chapters at the University of Connecticut and Ithaca College. We are hoping to collaborate on a shared recital event or fundraising initiative. (35 members)

James Madison University

(Virginia)

This year we led a variety of activities, including our annual Men’s Chorus Invitational and spearheading a project between the other collegiate ACDA chapters in the area. We have had several guest speakers at our meetings and have raised money