



Choral Sight-Singing Practices: Revisiting a Web-Based Survey

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Abstract

*The survey reported here was originally created for the book *Building Choral Excellence: Teaching Sight-singing in the Choral Rehearsal*. However, that book presented results in a limited form from a smaller sample of participants. This report includes responses from an additional 94 participants, limits the sample to only middle and high school choral directors, and presents the findings in much more detail. The survey asked choral directors who were active sight-singing teachers to identify how much time they spend teaching sight-singing, the methods or materials they prefer, and how they assess student progress. Results indicated some significant differences based on whether or not sight-singing was a part of contest participation, preferences for certain pitch and rhythm reading systems, and a varied approach to assessment. Such findings could help beginning teachers decide how to organize their curriculum and might guide decisions by state organizations regarding the role of music reading in contest and all-state events*

Sight-singing is one of the most important, and perhaps most difficult, skills for the choral singer to master. Since the early 1700s American choral directors have explored the most effective methods for teaching sight-singing. Music publishers continually present us with new and improved methods for teaching sight-singing and, more recently, even *The Rough Guide* series has become

involved.¹ While most choir directors agree on the importance of teaching sight-singing, they often differ in the amount of time they spend teaching it and the methods they use.

In 1988 Daniels stated "The development of competency in sight reading is a subject that is frequently neglected in the field of choral music" (p. 22). Surveys and other research on instructional objectives and the use of rehearsal time in secondary choral programs have generally supported this perception. A 1998 review of sight-singing research (Demorest, 1998b) listed four surveys of sight-singing instruction conducted from 1961-1993 (Daniels, 1988; Hales, 1961; Johnson, 1987; May, 1993). The results of those surveys indicated that while directors agreed on the importance of music reading instruction, they differed widely in the approaches used and the amount of time spent teaching it. The same review discussed numerous studies of individual sight-singing achievement conducted between 1940 and 1996 (Carey, 1959; Demorest & May 1995; Gaston, 1940; Henry & Demorest, 1994; Nolker, 1996). Those studies reported a wide variety of individual ability and relatively poor performance in sight-singing overall for high school choral singers.

Since the early 1990s, there have been few comprehensive surveys of teachers' approaches to and time spent teaching sight-singing. We might

¹ *The Rough Guide to Reading Music and Basic Theory* by Hugo Pinksterboer, London: Rough Guides, 2001.

expect teachers to be paying more attention to music reading instruction, given both the advent of National Standards (MENC, 1994) and an increased focus on individual assessment and accountability. A recent national study by Norris (2004) surveyed sight-singing requirements at large group choral festivals across the U.S. to examine the prevalence of such requirements. He found that less than half the states included sight-singing in their large group contest, and even fewer included sight-singing scores in the final contest ratings. Participation in all areas was lower for junior high than for high school, suggesting that music reading does not yet occupy a central role in many of our choral programs.

Two recent dissertations described statewide surveys of choral teachers on two different aspects of music reading instruction. Von Kampen (2003) examined influences on Nebraska choral directors' ($N = 251$) decisions to teach music reading. Results indicated that over half (52%) did not teach music reading. He found that attitudes toward sight-singing were related positively to geographic region and school size, with large schools in the eastern part of the state having a more positive attitude. Kuehne (2003) focused on approaches to sight-singing used by Florida middle school choir directors ($N = 151$). She found that sight-singing was taught most consistently in suburban, as opposed to urban or rural schools, and that a majority of teachers employed methods consistent with a Kodaly approach.

The current nationwide survey was created to explore sight-singing instructional practices at the end of the century in preparation for a book on choral sight-singing². The expanded report presented here includes responses from an additional 94 participants, limits the data to responses of middle and high school choral directors, and includes a more extensive presentation of the results. The survey asked choral directors questions about the role of music reading in their curricula, the time spent teaching music reading, the methods used to teach it, the materials preferred, and approaches to assessment. The purpose was to provide a comprehensive description of the most common approaches to music reading instruction in the choral rehearsal.

² A portion of the data from this survey representing the first 178 participants was first published in *Building Choral Excellence: Teaching Sight-singing in the Choral Rehearsal* (Demorest, 2001). The current report expands both the sample and the extent of the findings beyond those reported in the book.

METHOD

Survey respondents ($N=272$) included choral directors from 45 of the 50 United States ($n=270$) and Canada ($n=2$). While the geographic representation was broad, it should be noted that the sampling was not done scientifically. Notices were posted on the MENC and ACDA websites and calls were sent to several distribution lists, but participation was entirely self-selected. Consequently, (given their access to the world wide web and their interest in sight-singing) the participants may not be representative of the general choral teaching population. For example, only 28 out of 272 respondents to the survey (10.3 percent) reported that they did not teach sight-singing. This number stands in stark contrast to other surveys reporting the percentage of choral directors that teach music reading (Hales, 1961; von Kampen, 2003), and suggests that those directors who did *not* teach sight-singing were much less motivated to respond. Despite those limitations, the survey does provide some useful information on what active sight-singing teachers deem important to their practice. In addition to the removal of the 28 directors who did not teach reading, data from the 23 elementary choir teachers who responded were not included, yielding a final sample of 221 Middle School and High School choral directors that teach music reading actively.

Responses to the online survey were in the form of Likert scales, rating scales, pull-down menus, and open-ended responses³. Data were automatically coded and entered into a tab-delimited file for later analysis. Source locations of the respondent's ISP address were also recorded with the data to ensure that no duplicate responses were included. For ease of reading I will discuss the implications of each portion of the results as they are reported below.

RESULTS

Time devoted to teaching sight-singing

In this survey, directors were asked to identify the number of choirs in their programs and how many of those ensembles received sight-singing instruction. Of the directors who taught sight-singing, over 70% reported teaching sight-singing equally to

³ See the survey online at <http://faculty.washington.edu/demorest/survey.cgi>

all their groups, a change from earlier surveys where sight-singing was less frequent with advanced groups. The majority reported teaching sight-singing all year with 28% teaching it every rehearsal, and 52% *almost* every rehearsal. Seventy-one percent of directors chose to teach sight-singing after warm-ups, and a majority reported teaching sight-singing primarily as separate from the literature, but occasionally as a part of rehearsal. Respondents spent an average of 9.5 minutes per rehearsal on sight-singing instruction, which is in the upper range of the times reported by other surveys.

Preferred Sight-singing Methods and Materials

In looking at results of prior surveys, no specific methods or materials were found to be dominant overall (Demorest, 1998b). More localized studies however, did show preferences, e.g. May’s (1993) survey in Texas and Kuehne’s (2003) survey in Florida, both of which found more frequent use of movable “do.” The current survey asked directors to choose the pitch and rhythm reading system they

would use to read a sample melody that was in minor (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The sample melody from the survey

This strategy avoided the problem of terminology somewhat by asking for the actual syllables used rather than using a method’s name, because there can be many variations of movable “do” or numbers. By having the melody in minor, I was able to discern their corresponding system for that tonality at the same time (e.g. movable “do”/minor “la”).

As Figure 2 shows, movable “do” is the favored system for reading pitch with 64% of directors. The majority of those respondents favored minor “la” by more than 2 to 1. Among respondents, overall 21% favored using numbers with the remaining 15% using fixed “do,” neutral syllables, or other. Figure 2 details the preferred rhythm systems in use.

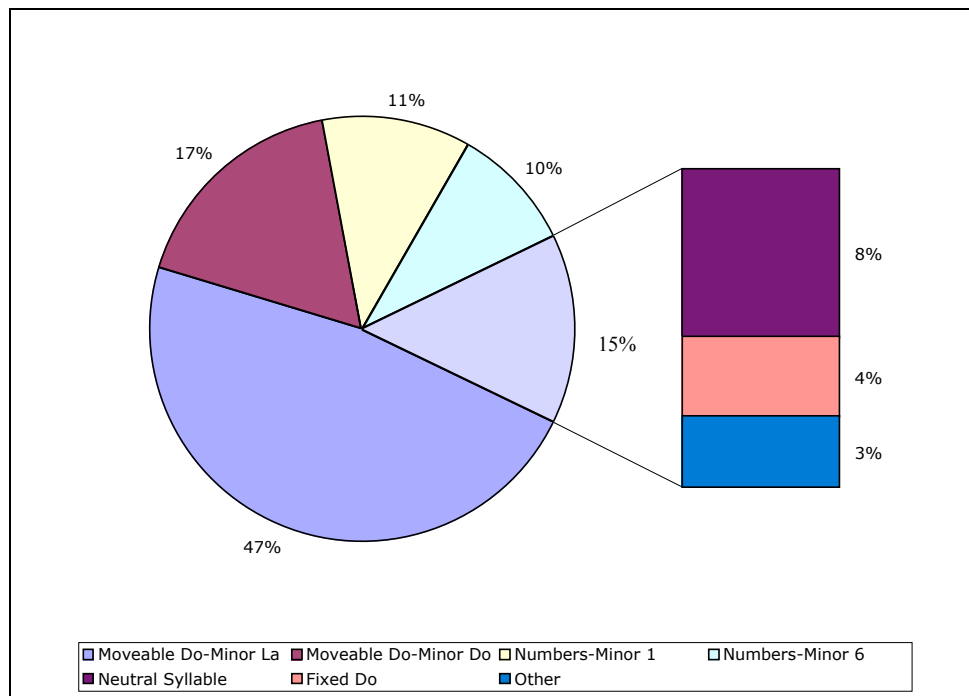


Figure 2. Percentages of pitch reading systems used by choral directors.

There was less agreement on approaches to reading rhythm, as evidenced by the large percentage of response in the "other" category. Counting rhythm was clearly favored. Forty-seven percent of directors used some variation of a counting system to read rhythm, while 23% used syllables (e.g. ta-ti). The rest were split between neutral syllables, Gordon's syllables and other. Respondents were given an opportunity to list their system if none of the choices fit. The 45 directors that chose "other" gave responses to reading the

rhythm of Figure 1 that ranged from note values (quarter, eighth-eighth) to down-down-up. Many of the "other" responses were simply some variation of counting or ta-ti, which indicated much more idiosyncratic approaches to reading rhythms than pitch reading. Based on this limited sample, it would appear that the majority of these choir teachers used movable "do" for pitch-reading and counting for rhythm-reading.

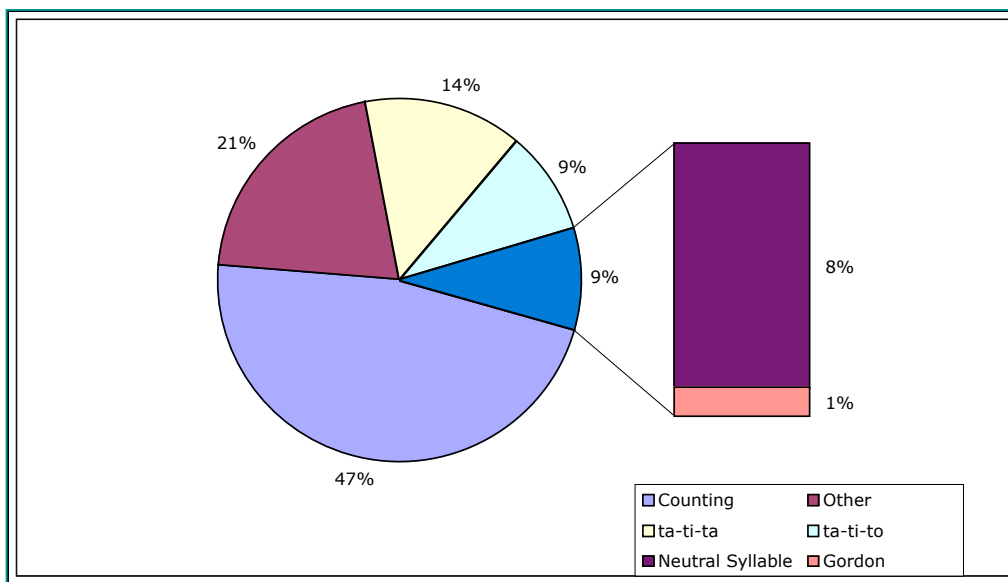


Figure 3. Percentages of rhythm reading systems used by choir directors.

Directors were also asked to identify how frequently they used any of 27 types of sight-singing materials including chorales and octavos⁴. Table 1 lists the top 14 responses in order of use. Directors could choose more than one set of materials. They indicated how frequently they used each one with a rating from 1=(never) to 5 (always). The column to the far right indicates the mean frequency of use for each of the materials. As previous surveys have indicated (Hales, 1961; Johnson, 1987; May, 1993), most directors seem to prefer using self-created materials or getting material from octavos and hymnals rather than purchasing commercial texts. The two most popular commercial publications were

the *Jenson Sight-singing Course* and *Successful Sight-singing*, which corresponded to Kuehne's finding (2003) for Florida middle school teachers.

Finally, directors were asked to rate qualities they look for in selecting sight-singing materials. Ratings ranged from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important). Figure 4 lists the features directors rated most highly in order of importance. As expected, having materials graded for difficulty was highly valued. Perhaps more surprising was the importance placed on having minor melodies and evaluation opportunities built into the text. The issue of evaluation opportunities was rated slightly lower in the first report of the survey, but rose to number three as more subjects responded.

⁴ See the complete list of materials online at: <http://faculty.washington.edu/demorest/survey.cgi>

Table 1

Most frequently-used sight-singing materials

<i>Title</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Mean Frequency of Use</i>
Self-created Materials	72	2.94
Octavos	48	2.17
Hymnals	35	1.85
Jenson Sight-singing Course	32	1.83
Successful Sight-singing	27	1.56
Bach Chorales	27	1.55
Essential Musicianship	23	1.61
Choral Approach to Sight-singing	21	1.42
Patterns of Sound	19	1.45
The Sight-singer	18	1.43
Melodia	14	1.32
Oxford Folk Song Series	11	1.23
Something New to Sing About	10	1.20
Kodály Choral Method	9	1.18

1. The material is graded for difficulty
2. The material includes minor melodies.
3. The material provides evaluation opportunities.
4. The material features separate pitch- and rhythm-reading activities.
5. The material includes music theory information.
6. The material is method specific. (e.g. includes a method for teaching and model lessons).
7. The material is drawn from existing music.
8. The material includes modal melodies.

Figure 4. Ranked list of features in materials.

Use of Individual Assessment

Directors appeared to value the presence of evaluation opportunities in texts, but how often did they choose to assess their students' progress? Participants in the survey were asked about both the type and frequency of assessment used in their ensembles and whether or not sight singing was a part of students' grades.

The majority of directors (83%) reported doing some kind of sight-singing test during the year, though only 47% reported doing formal as opposed to informal evaluation. Thirty-six percent of directors reported testing students at least three times per year and 80% reported testing at least once per year. Teachers were asked to choose from a list of common evaluation procedures, which included singing alone for the teacher or in quartets, as well as taped testing. Table 2 reports the breakdown of assessment approaches used.

Table 2

Most commonly used assessment procedures

<i>Assessment Procedures</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Alone for the Teacher	76	34.4
Alone in Rehearsal	23	10.4
In Quartets in Rehearsal	23	10.4
Alone on Tape	22	10.0
In Quartets for the Teacher	17	7.7
In Quartets on Tape	2	.9
Other	32	14.5
None	26	11.8
Total	221	100.0

Clearly, assessment takes time either during or after rehearsal. It was interesting that only 11% of directors reported some form of taped assessment, which seems the most time efficient means of testing students. The majority favored individual over quartet assessment, while the almost 15% of directors that responded "other" described using combinations of these choices. The survey also asked directors what role these assessments played

in the students' grades. While 86% of directors counted sight-singing assessments in students' grades, only 43% counted it for more than 10%.

Table 3.

Extent to which sight-singing is included in grades

<i>Percent of Grade</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
0%	53	24.0
10%	73	33.0
20%	63	28.5
30%	25	11.3
40%	2	.9
50%	3	1.4
60%	2	.9
Total	221	100.0

The Role of Contest

A recent survey by Norris (2004) found that less than half of the states in the US have sight-singing as a part of their large-group contest. Yet previous research (May, 1993; Brendell, 1996) suggested a possible relationship between time spent on sight-singing instruction and sight-singing requirements for contest. Both May & Brendell studied directors that had sight-singing as part of a contest or choral festival. Both found that teachers in their studies devoted more instructional time to it than directors that participated in other studies. In the present survey, 122 directors or 55% of the sample had sight-singing as a part of their large group contest. To test the possible influence of contest participation on sight-singing instruction, the contest and non-contest directors in this survey were compared on key variables such as rehearsal minutes devoted to sight-singing, frequency of instruction, percent of grade devoted to sight-singing, frequency of assessment and number of choirs where sight-singing is taught. Table 4 shows the means for these two groups on all of the variables.

Contest directors spent significantly more time on sight-singing [$F(1,206) = 18.56, p < .001$] with an average of 10.46 minutes per rehearsal compared with 8.32 minutes for non-contest directors.

Table 4.

Means for contest and non-contest directors on key instructional variables.

<i>Instructional Variables</i>	<i>Sight-singing at Contest</i>	
	<i>Yes (n=121)</i>	<i>No (n=100)</i>
Minutes/rehearsal on sight-singing	*10.46 (3.67)	8.32 (3.42)
Times evaluated/year	2.85 (1.12)	2.76 (1.2)
Percentage of grade	*15.62% (12.4)	12% (10.23)
Percentage of choirs taught	95.8% (12.7)	93.0% (17.78)

Note: Not all variables received complete responses. Total n ranged from 203-221 across the 4 variables.

* significant at $p < .05$, two-tailed test

Contest directors also counted sight-singing as a significantly higher percentage of students' grades [$F(1,220) = 5.04, p < .05$]. There were no significant differences between contest and non-contest directors in how many of their choirs received instruction or how often they were evaluated. However means were higher in both cases for the contest participants.

CONCLUSION

It is important to reiterate that the data presented here were not based on a random sample of the population and are therefore not necessarily representative of the total population of choral teachers. These data, however, do give us a glimpse into the practices of those directors who took the time to respond. The variety in geography and program size provides some measure of representation for this self-selected sample.

The survey revealed several interesting facts about current practices in teaching sight-singing. A surprisingly high number of the respondents were using some form of movable "do" to teach pitch reading, which corresponded to the results of May's 1993 study of Texas choir directors and Kuehne's 2003 survey of Florida middle school teachers. Perhaps movable "do" is becoming the choice of choir directors in the United States. Previous studies

that looked at fixed vs. movable “do” in terms of achievement (Demorest & May, 1995; Henry & Demorest 1994) did not find that one was clearly superior to the other. The use of movable “do” may reflect either the influence of students’ elementary training prior to beginning choir or the preparation for college training that comes later. It would be interesting to know how many college programs are now teaching some form of movable “do” as their primary pitch reading system. There is less agreement in rhythm reading, suggesting a more individual approach, though counting is clearly favored.

There is also little agreement on what materials to use for teaching music reading. Teachers seem to be relying primarily on materials they create, a less efficient but perhaps more satisfying and cost-effective approach. Teachers report using octavos and hymnals as materials for music reading, suggesting that an approach that integrates sight-singing with literature is preferred. The guidelines teachers mention with respect to what they look for in materials may give commercial publishers some insight into how to construct more widely-used materials. Teachers rate assessment opportunities and inclusion of minor melodies as very important features, yet neither of these features appears prevalent in the majority of published sight-singing books. The two commercial texts receiving the highest usage scores do feature both of these elements, however, lending validity to the teachers’ list.

It would also be interesting to ascertain if the use of commercial texts would be more prevalent if choral programs moved to a student-centered method book, as is the case with their instrumental counterparts. In such a model each beginning student would purchase their own Level 1 singers method book with sight-singing and vocal exercises for practice at home. This change could solve the cost outlay problem for teachers and provide a better source of revenue for publishers, while focusing on the development of reading skills in the individual singer.

There appears to be quite a bit of attention paid to assessment among the directors responding to this survey. That may reflect the changing climate of the music classroom with the influence of the National Standards (Kuehne, 2003), or perhaps the increased availability of good assessment models. Demorest (1998a) found that regular assessment actually improved students’ sight-singing performance.

Thus a move toward more individual assessment

could be very positive for students’ skill development. While the average time spent teaching music reading was adequate for most respondents, those directors whose teaching is evaluated through contest spend significantly more time and give significantly more weight to music reading instruction.

Comparisons between contest and non-contest participants suggest that including sight-singing at contest may indeed influence such significant instructional decisions as time spent on the skill and how students are evaluated for a grade. If we as a profession think that this skill is central to choral training as prior surveys suggest (Daniels, 1988; Hales 1961), perhaps we should consider evaluating our groups on this skill at every opportunity. Norris (2004) suggests that choral directors in the United States would benefit from a careful study of more evolved state sight-singing assessments and a standardization of content, materials and assessments for evaluating the skill. The results of this survey suggest that the inclusion of sight-singing in contests may be an effective way to motivate directors to spend rehearsal time developing the skill of music reading.

I hope the results of this survey can both reaffirm and give guidance to the many choral directors committed to teaching sight-singing skills to their students. We all benefit from more information about both widely-used and successful sight-singing approaches as we make choices about what and how to teach. Prior research suggests that choral directors seem to agree on the importance of music reading in the curriculum, yet are not always successful at finding the time to teach it. Perhaps with better information about how to include this material in choral rehearsals, the teaching of music reading will become a more central part of all choral music programs.

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