



Role Playing and Teamwork in the Male Choir

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Building any musical ensemble requires teamwork. Of course, an effective team functions well when the roles of contributing members are well defined. Picture the youth soccer team with a crowd of jerseys, in a cloud of dust, following the ball *en masse* wherever it travels across the field, and you will recognize the chaos of ill-defined roles. Each player wants to score and to win, but such an action hampers the team effort by individuals doing too much and ignoring the other members' prescribed role.

Likewise, young singers in a male choir may have little idea what role they ought to play. Guys simply report dutifully to their assigned seats, assuming their placement is the result of factors they don't control, e.g., how much their voice has changed, how tall they are, or whichever section needed singers when they joined.

Since young men often relate well to sports analogies and guys can be motivated to make a role-driven contribution, I offer a model that may help direct young men's efforts in rehearsal toward a specific role. In my experience, singers respond with pride and good attitudes when given individual roles within a group setting. Since I live in Indiana, using basketball analogies makes good sense!

Bass, the Point Guard

On the court, the point guard manages the pace of the action and the spacing of the team members on the floor. Lots of contact with the ball means frequent evaluation of the other team members – sharing leadership and opportunity according to skill and finding the hot-handed shooter. In the male choir—or any choir, basses are well positioned to determine issues of tempo, intonation, balance, and color.

Assigning young basses such a role may seem counter-intuitive to them. Doing so pre-empts the typical bass attitude of “background” singing since they seldom have the melody. Make basses aware of their importance; ask them to find and support the melody from among other voice parts; identify their crucial role in good intonation.

As a young bass many years ago, I grew tired of conductors telling our bass section that we were consistently late. As a young conductor, I found out these teachers were right! Due to the low frequency of bass pitches and the typically larger size of the bass vocal mechanism, these voices “speak” more slowly than other voice parts.

The problem is exacerbated in just-changed voices since the musculature has not developed enough for voices to be agile in the lower register; however, harping at singers in one section for the same problem only demoralizes that section and doesn't help the ensemble as a whole. Instead, “cover” for these singers by telling them—and the rest of the ensemble—that there's a valid reason for the lateness of their sound. Explain from an acoustical and physiological point of view.

The conductor can then give the basses a unique assignment, invigorating their efforts and improving the situation by asking them to think proactively and make their sound earlier than the rest of the ensemble. They will take pride in this action, I believe, while they “pave the way” as the advance guard for their brothers in the ensemble.

Tenor I, the Shooting Guard

The shooting guard must have the ability to get open plus display the steely nerves necessary to knock down a difficult three-point shot as time expires. Shooting guards must

want the ball when the game is on the line, and they should be almost flawless at the free throw line. As partners in the backcourt, they have a strong and attentive relationship with the point guard.

In the choral realm, singers in the first tenor section must likewise check in frequently with the basses, the point guards in the analogy. First tenors are generally in the weakest position to affect the pitch of the ensemble, but they certainly can make any chord ring with a focus on proportional balance, vowels, and tuning within the ensemble if they are attentive to their back court partners in the bass section.

As for maintaining a cool hand with the game on the line, the first tenors should, for example, tune the third at the top of their range for the final chord and balance it so the whole room rings with the team sound! Describing such a challenge to students gives the section a sense of purpose and a dash of healthy competition.

Tenor II, the Forward

On the basketball court, forwards must have swagger! They must be able to drive the lane or pull up for a jump shot. Good forwards don't call attention to themselves; they just quietly score lots of points, actively rebound, pass, and play good defense. They can move effectively without the ball—the melody in my analogy—but they must also be masterful ball handlers, making quick decisions about whether to shoot or pass.

A basketball coach asks that his or her players focus on foot position. A choral director should help young male singers navigate the “break” between chest and head voice by frequently thinking about vocal “position” in the musical line. Foot position helps an athlete give attention and flexibility to the next step, rather than simply anchoring the body where a guy currently stands.

Vocal position, likewise, does not rely solely on the note being sung but teaches singers to look ahead at upcoming notes so that they can adjust their thinking about vocal weight to make a quick change of direction. A phrase that begins in a low or comfortable chest voice may quickly ascend, thus requiring a lighter weight while maintaining sufficient breath energy.

Because the second tenor part often encompasses a wide range and treacherous register shifts, singers in this section need tools (understanding how the voice works and how to navigate between registers) and positive reinforcement to play a good high/low game.

Baritone, the Center

Even if contact with the ball is limited, centers have a profound effect on every play. Unlike the basketball analogy where true centers are rare, baritones in male choirs are often the most common voice assignment for guys. Although baritones seldom carry the melody, they frequently provide a pivot for shifting harmonies in male choir repertoire.

You may have heard the baritone part referred to as the junk part, a term that is bantered about in barbershop circles. That designation is humorous and harmless in mature ensembles, but no beginning singer in any choir wants to be designated as junk. Describing the baritone role as the center for the ensemble, the team, is accurate and much more inspiring. Baritones are the glue holding the other parts together.

Consider creating an analogy in which offensive rebounds are opportunities for the baritone section to salvage the intonation of the ensemble from inside. In basketball, it is imperative that the center be aware of the location of everyone else on the court. He can then set up his teammates with expert passing and also yield if anyone drives to the paint for a shot.

For each voice part, you, the teacher, can easily create an analogy to serve specific needs within the repertoire for your male singers. For example, ask guys to “dunk” when a show of vocal force is needed. Talk about a bounce pass when the melody shifts between two voice parts.

Incorporate appropriate basketball gestures into the warm-ups so your guys engage physically and naturally with their vocal mechanism. As sports seasons change, find activities that connect musical elements to other sports and other facets of the daily lives of young men in your male ensemble. You are giving them creative avenues in which they will have a positive role to play. Your male choir will grow in more ways than you can ever imagine!



A little spark kindles a great fire.

—Spanish proverb
