



All of My Singers Are Singers. Correct?

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"I can't carry a tune in a bucket." "If I sing, your ears may bleed." "I'll eat spiders before I will sing in public." Have you heard such comments when a person describes his or her singing voice? As a choral music educator, I often heard such derogatory remarks from my students, parents, choristers, and colleagues. Hearing these comments was the catalyst to begin work with twelve voluntary adults who self-designated as non-singers. They were recruited from the university and broader community through social media, posters, and word of mouth.

These participants were invited to partake in eight, one-hour private voice lessons over a span of three months. During each lesson, we would work on breathing and relaxation exercises, pitch-discrimination exercises, and repertoire known to the individual singer while simultaneously discovering the manifestations of their discomfort with singing.

Throughout the lessons, the participants—Ed, Gilbert, Marjorie, Helen, Sydney, Tony, Cheryl, Cathie, Sara, Nancy, Ameeta, and Cher—shared their thoughts and insights about their singing voices. From the narratives, the indications of their discomfort with singing were discovered through:

- sharing negative thoughts and feelings about singing
- displaying nervousness and self-consciousness when singing
- manifesting the singer's lack of confidence into physical tension

- expressing a reluctance to accept physical capability
- accepting the norm concept of singing

Sharing Negative Thoughts and Feelings about Singing

Many of the participants expressed negative thoughts and feelings about the possibility of singing in private or in public. For example, Gilbert, when he arrived at his first private lesson, stated, "Boy, I can't wait for the end of this lesson. I can't wait for it to be over." Sara, when asked to sing, exclaimed, "I can't sing. And now I have to come here and sing!" Nancy said, "I'm really sabotaging myself because here I am saying I can't sing when I probably really can. So why do I not want to do it when it's possible?"

A resistance to singing in public also became apparent through dialogue. Numerous participants expressed horror at the thought of singing in a public situation or allowing someone else to hear their singing voice. Gilbert expressed this sentiment by saying, "I don't want you as my instructor, my teacher, to go inside of my titanium shield that I have put around myself." Cathie, when asked if she wished she could sing, said, "Oh, it was always in my mind. Because we would go to karaoke and I would sit there and think, 'No way in a million years could I do that.'"

Continuing with the theme of resistance to singing in public, I asked the participants if they would sing "Happy Birthday" in a social setting or if they would sing an informal solo at a Christmas party. Sara was adamant in her response: "No way. Sometimes I mouth the words if I think someone is staring at me. I don't sing. I don't even sing at church. I stand there with the book open. I don't sing."

Sydney, when asked if she would sing a solo at a Christmas party, responded, "I would just melt on the floor. I could not do it. I would just say I can't do it and then I would probably go home."

Some participants projected other negative attitudes that

reinforced their belief that they couldn't or shouldn't sing. For example, after Tony had sung a very convincing rendition of a popular operetta tune, I said he should sing this particular work for his wife. Upon arriving at the lesson the following week, I asked if he had sung for his spouse. He responded, "I did, but she closed the door because the baby was going to sleep!"

Marjorie shared the following story. "So, last night I thought I had better practice. I went downstairs to the piano and I was picking out the starting note. I started to sing and immediately the dog comes up and lets me know he wants go outside." We search for things that reinforce our belief.

Displaying Nervousness and Self-Consciousness when Singing

This lack of confidence in their singing ability would often manifest itself in nervousness and self-consciousness. Ameeta commented: "I am very nervous in coming to singing lessons. Afterward, I am relieved that it's over. If you can see my hands on the video, you'll notice them shaking." When I asked Cathie if she would sing in public, she replied, "I think I would die before I would ever do that. Singing in front of a group of people? I can't imagine it."

In addition to nervousness, self-consciousness became apparent because of the participants' lack of confidence in their own voice and singing ability. Cheri, during one of the lessons, stammered, "I just honestly don't have the confidence. I just can't do it. It is painful for me to sing." When Ed was faced with the prospect of singing at the next lesson, he quipped, "I am very leery of the next lessons. I am very self-conscious about my situation. I consider myself a pretty good public speaker. And so I am not scared of being in front of the room or in front of the microphone. But I am apprehensive about singing. I feel so unskilled at it."

Manifesting Physical Tension Due to Lack of Confidence

Since the participants inadvertently allowed their lack of confidence to translate into nervousness and self-consciousness, this ultimately led to physical tightness and tension when trying to sing. The tension manifested itself in the inability to breathe properly, produce upper register notes, and sustain an adequate vocal sound.

At the end of one of the warm-up exercises in which Gilbert had run out of breath, he commented, "I just lost everything. I haven't been able to breathe with the diaphragm as much as I would like. Right away you get a little bit tense and then I'm not thinking about this [indicating his diaphragmatic area]. I'm thinking up here [putting his hand to his throat]." Helen spoke of a similar experience. "Yes, this morning I could take a full breath. It just came out. But now I am not going to be able to because I am thinking about it!"

When the participants were asked to sing upper register notes, they took a shallow breath and forced the sound from the throat and in so doing, created neck and body tension. For example, when Tony was singing a line that culminated in an F4, I noticed tension building up in his neck and shoulders and a glimmer of fright in his eyes at the prospect of having to sing F4. At the conclusion of the piece, he said, "As soon as you hit that note on the piano, I thought, 'Are you crazy?'" When I commented that if Marjorie could relax, she would be capable of singing a B4, she said, "It's the lack of confidence, I guess. It's more trusting that what comes out will not be horrendous."

Expressing a Reluctance to Accept Physical Capability

The participants' negative perception of themselves as singers was perpetuated in their reluctance to accept that they possessed the physical capability to match pitches. For example, when I assured Gilbert that he was correctly matching my pitch, his response was, "I'm amazed. Absolutely amazed! I wouldn't mind seeing that tape because I don't believe what has happened. Honestly, it's a fluke. It's an absolute fluke."

When I asked why, he held to this belief and responded, "Because I can't sing. It doesn't seem like it's me. It's like an out-of-body kind of thing—like watching myself from afar."

Accepting the Norm Concept of Singing

During the lessons, when I asked the participants to define singing, the responses centered on the concept of being able to deliver songs as a trained professional and subsequently that one should not partake in singing activities for fear of not reaching this standard. Ameeta, when asked why she was creating tension in her upper body, responded, "You want to know what is happening in my head? Whenever I am doing it [singing the line], I am so conscious of hitting the right note that it holds me back. Am I getting it? Am I doing it right? We

like to be right. We like to do it correctly.”

When I asked Sara why she did not sing, she responded, “I wouldn’t want to take the chance of not being able to sing what I hear in my head—the fear factor, failure.” Gilbert exclaimed, “I don’t want to make a mistake. So I am scared. It kind of boils down to needing approval.”

Cathie poignantly summarized this idea of striving for perfection when she said, “Who should really care if you should sing out of tune all the time? What does it matter? I guess it must be a society norm. All the should, should, shoulds. It [the concept of being able to sing perfectly or not singing at all] is at the top of the list, and it’s not good. I don’t know who has the rule book, but boy, we follow the rules.”

Ideas to Help Reluctant Singers in Your Classroom

In our classrooms and with our choirs, we encounter reluctant singers. It is sometimes difficult to assist these singers in a group situation. The following exercises were used during this research with the participants. They can be easily transferred to an ensemble situation. Many of these exercises can be a part of your warm-ups or performed during transition times in the rehearsal. They will aid all singers and will not single out the reluctant ones.

- Call-and-response exercises allow the reluctant singer to vocalize individually through a short melody where the singer controls the length and range. There is no correct response. This helps to build confidence in one’s voice. These exercises can be led by you or your section leaders.
- Vocalizing into the upper range is important. Making sounds like a gorilla, the wind, Chihuahuas, race cars, ghosts, or sirens allows singers to sing in a lighter head voice and develops a neglected range in our culture.
- Have the reluctant singer hum a pitch. Ask the rest of the choir to match the pitch. This allows the reluctant singer to get the aural sensation of matching pitches without him/her having to match a random pitch. There is no judgment call on the part of anyone, including the director.
- Have your singer sing any pitch and then count underneath them to develop breath support and sustained tones. Re-

luctant singers often do not want to sustain pitches, but this will give them an incentive to reach a tangible goal.

- Having each singer in your ensemble play a kazoo allows your reluctant singers to develop proper singing techniques in a stress-free and relaxed atmosphere. The singers must utilize the same techniques on a kazoo that they use when singing. When you want them to sing, simply pull the kazoo away from the mouth, and their singing voice will be heard.
- Often, reluctant singers do not have an understanding of melodic contour. Using a simple melody such as *Rain, Rain Go Away* and either drawing on a board or moving the body to the contour of the melody engages the visual, kinesthetic, and aural learning style.
- Visual tonal exercise: Bring in glasses and a pitcher of water and have the students tune the glasses by adding different amounts of water in order to play *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*. This will help the visual learners to see that different tones require physical change and that each change must be exact. Reluctant singers often do not have a sense of the physical change that is needed to pitch correctly, and this exercise will help them to visualize this aspect.
- Singing between C4 and A4 is the easiest range in which to accurately pitch the songs. Once you start having the singers match your given pitch, ensure success by using notes within this range.
- Record your reluctant singers. This allows them to listen and evaluate their vocal quality and pitch-matching outside of the group context. Recording musical lines during the rehearsal also gives the reluctant singers a chance to rehearse on their own and at a slower pace than is often taken in rehearsal.

Conclusion

It is important for us, as choral directors and music educators, to be aware of the fact that there may be people in our choirs and classes who hold a negative view of their voices. In my case, many of the participants in this study were also in my community choir but, unbeknownst to me, held a negative view of themselves as singers. If we only see these negative

quips and manifestations as annoying pessimism, then we may miss an opportunity to get to the root of the issue and help them hold a more positive view of their singing. If the root of the problem is never discovered, then we may lose these people as singers.

As with my participants, once we discussed their views and the negative manifestations were identified, they allowed themselves to use the exercises to develop their voices while taking on a more positive vocal viewpoint. Sydney, when asked at the culmination of the lessons how she viewed herself as a singer, responded, “My perception of myself has changed because I realize that with a little knowledge and encouragement, I am able to sing! I feel more confident. That makes me relax more. I will definitely continue to sing!”

Beg, Borrow, and Steal: A Survival Guide for the Rural Choral Teacher

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In my teaching career I’ve had the opportunity to teach in three very distinct, very different school districts in the Northwest. My first school district was urban. My current school district is suburban, and the third district, in which I have spent the majority of my time, was rural. Each position has had certain advantages and challenges depending upon socio-economic status of the students, administrative support, and the content I was required to teach.

Most of our Idaho ACDA members are rural choral directors. The reality of our great state of Idaho, and many states like ours, is that we may be the only music instructor in the district or one of a handful in your district. We live where agriculture abounds and are literally surrounded by it. When I open the back door to my choir room, I can see a pasture of goats.

At my last school, the grounds were surrounded by beet fields. This can be challenging when trying to create a choral program that will be respected and cherished by your school and community. While I am not an expert on the subject, I

have had some success as a rural choral director, and I’d like to share some of my tips and tricks for building and maintaining a choral program in a rural area.

Professional Development

Attend as many choral/musical professional development opportunities as you possibly can. For me, this means attending the annual October ACDA retreat in Sun Valley, Idaho, to work with clinicians from around the country. When you are the only music teacher in your building, the district, the town, or the county, it helps to hone your craft as often as you can. Most of the time I pay for these trips out of my pocket, but I feel it is money well spent.

There are institutions, such as CapEd, who will sponsor teachers to go to conferences. They take a little more work on your part. If conferences won’t work for you, a master’s degree may be an avenue worth exploring. The important thing is to stay on top of your game and hone your craft.

Networking

The teachers you meet while at conferences are invaluable! It is important to write down e-mail addresses and enter numbers into your phone. When you are working on a unit of solfège and remember the gentlemen from Boise who had an amazing lesson on teaching intervals, you can e-mail him and ask for the lesson plans.

Perhaps you are in an area where there are no jazz festivals within 250 miles, but you discover a teacher in a neighboring town who is working on a jazz unit at the same time as you. You could arrange a mini-choir festival where your choir takes a field trip to that school for the day. You then rehearse a combined number, and the other teacher hosts a scat workshop while you work with the combo. Both choirs share a concert that night. The possibilities are limited only by your budget and your imagination.

Share Facilities, Music, and Equipment

One thing I never have enough of is money. If you are a choir teacher who has a surplus, please share your secret! For the rest of us, sharing resources may be the way to go. I love it when my colleagues invite me to raid their music libraries. It’s almost like Christmas! If your choirs cannot fit on your risers, a fantastic problem to have, ask if you could borrow a few sets