Choral Directors are from Mars and Voice Teachers are from Venus:
The Top Ten Complaints From Both Sides of the Aisle
(or “The Farmer and the Cowman Should Be Friends”)

by
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Editor’s note: This article is based upon information presented by the five authors in lectures at the 2009 ACDA National Conference in Oklahoma City, OK; the 2010 NATS National Conference in Salt Lake City, UT; and the 2011 ACDA National Conference in Chicago, IL. In Chicago, each of the members of the team was asked to present topics in his/her expertise. This article is a summary of their presentations.

A PowerPoint of this presentation, and the second in the series, “Choral Directors are from Mars and Voice Teachers are from Venus: ‘Sing from the Diaphragm’ and other Vocal Mistructions,” is available at http://www.nats.org/choral-directors-from-mars-voice-teachers-from-venus.html

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Henderson: There is a long history of complaints from choral directors about voice teachers and vice versa. Are these complaints substantiated? Are we actually approaching the same ideas using different language? Because of this perceived animosity, the authors wanted to begin a national conversation about developing a common language between the voice studio and choral rehearsal; to provide tools for choral directors and voice teachers to start such a conversation; and to bridge perceived schisms between the voice faculty and the choral faculty at institutions and foster understanding of the unique settings in which each group operates. The members of the present voice team, and leaders of NATS and ACDA, have a further goal: to build a common language that reflects our common goal of providing excellence in instruction and performance.

So, let us examine ten of these complaints, from both sides of the aisles, to see if we can come to some common consensus about these issues.

Complaint #1
Tone Quality

Voice Teacher: “The choral conductor has my students singing straight tone for the entire 50-minute rehearsal!”

Choral Conductor: “The voice teachers keep changing my vowels, and they tell my sopranos to ignore my instructions about straight tone!”

Hansen: Sound familiar? The issue for many is that the choral sound ideal of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is an extremely blended sound, where vibrato (especially in soprano voices) is seen as a flaw in the overall blend. So issues of tone color seem to revolve around concepts of individual sound versus group or cooperative sound.

What do choral conductors want? They want the individuals in their ensemble to work together in order to create a group sound. The problem is each choral conductor’s idea of a preferred group sound may be
different, and may imply that the particular “sound” is the only sound allowed in that ensemble, regardless of voice part, tessitura, dynamic, style, or period. Four common choral sound ideals include:

- the extremely blended, homogeneous group sound ideal (non-vibrato) in all voices;
- the quasi-English boy choir; blended sound ideal (non-vibrato primarily in the soprano voices);
- the cooperative sound ideal, meaning singers are instructed to sing with their natural vibrato (5–7cps and a half-step on either side of the fundamental pitch—not a wide tremolo); and
- the full-bodied sound ideal, meaning singers are instructed to sing with full (operatic) volume and projection.

Some choral conductors do not address the idea of blend, never even using that word, instead focusing the ensemble’s work on performing things “together”—the actual meaning of the French word “ensemble.” These ensembles work to:

- match pure vowels;
- breath together so entrances are rhythmically precise;
- release the sound in the room together so that endings are rhythmically precise.

In this choral world, choral sound has a lot to do with the balanced integration of each of the voices present. These choral conductors are not so interested in a blended sound as a cooperative sound, where everyone participates with the best of what they have to give to the effort. Mirroring the teachings of Robert Shaw, these choral conductors work to have the right pitch with the right diction at the right time. The issue of suppressing or matching individual voices is not addressed.

What do voice teachers want:

- that the individual singer works to develop an individuated sound, toward the end of achieving the best individual sound that she can.
- good solo singing requires using everything an individual voice is capable of producing, including all parameters of volume and vibrato.

How can a developing high school or college singer find success in private voice lessons and as a member of his ensemble? These young singers are works in progress. Their voice teachers are helping them discover their vocal potential and are usually on guard against any singing that will set that development back. That may leave the college choral conductor in a bit of a quandary: whether to accept the voices as the voice teachers want them to be, or to ask for vocal techniques that might not be what the voice teacher would like to see and hear.

Gather together a group of voice teachers and choral conductors, and you will most likely find something such as the following:

- some teachers believe there is only one way to sing and everyone, in any style whatsoever, should sing in that way. This view applies to voice teachers and choral conductors alike;
- some teachers believe once good, healthy vocal production has been developed and the singer has learned how to avoid vocal damage, good technique can be used as a jumping off point in any style, including musical theater, jazz, and rock; and
- others have no opinion, and simply teach as they were taught.

The enormous interpretive contrasts in solo and choral music require singers to perform with a color palette from full-out soloistic singing to the most intimate of sounds. It is how we get students to experience these contrasts in their formative years, balanced with the individual expertise and preference of that student’s voice teacher and choral conductor; that is the question. Some tone qualities are appropriate to some repertoire, but not all repertoire requires the same tone quality. Whether students are able to adapt to a requisite tone quality is a matter for discussion between voice teacher and choral conductor. Acknowledging that no one has the one, right answer; and that each of us instructors are on a lifelong journey of learning, go a long way in working cooperatively for the goal of the student’s best learning outcome.
COMPLAINT # 2
SOLO SELECTION

Voice Teacher: “The choir director selected my student for a solo and that student has no business singing solos from Verdi’s Requiem as a freshman!”

Choral Conductor: “This is a young, exciting, ringing voice that can easily negotiate the tessitura.”

Simonson: Individuals often hear very different qualities in different voices. So much depends on background, context, experience with the voice, and even room acoustics. All can impact the decision-making process. In the above instance, the choral conductor may have heard an exciting, thrilling timbre in an excerpt performed by a young singer. There are, however, many additional considerations: is this solo developmentally appropriate for this singer; can this instrument easily carry over the accompaniment (orchestral); can this instrument fill the hall without exceeding the individual’s level of free production; and is the student sufficiently musically mature? All must be answered along with the normal vocal considerations.

Consulting with the students’ voice teachers before the audition process can go a long way in smoothing the path. Make sure the voice teachers are involved in the audition preparation. Sharing the responsibility for solo selection by including colleagues helps build a team approach to voice education. Another solution might include limiting the audition to students nominated by their voice teachers. From the voice teachers’ point of view, please remember that your choral colleagues are offering your students opportunities for experience and growth that you cannot. Keep the lines of communication open and flowing. Ask at the beginning of the year/semester/season what works are being programmed and what student solos will be available. Offer your help and support, and remember we are all in this process together. Our actions will reflect the ethics and professionalism we bring to our work far more than our words alone.

COMPLAINT #3
AGE/SIZE
APPROPRIATE REPERTOIRE

Voice Teacher: “The choral conductor thinks one size fits all. The repertoire in the top choir this semester is all over the map in terms of styles and periods. One voice does not fit all styles.”

Choral Conductor: “The voice teacher is teaching every student in his studio exactly the same way, whether the student has a naturally large instrument or a small one. They all are learning huge Verdi arias this semester for their juries. Most of these students are not going to sing at the Met.”

Hansen: This overarching problem seems to occur simply when conductors or voice teachers select repertoire according to what is fabulous repertoire, rather than according to what will fit the voices and talents of the particular students at hand.

Choral conductors typically want their choirs to be successful singing in many styles of music spanning the historical periods. In addition, choral conductors often seek a homogenous sound as their preferred “group sound,” no matter the style of music. These conductors are primarily concerned about balance, blend, and controlling vibrato.

On the other hand, voice teachers typically want their students to experience music written in the nineteenth through

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twenty-first centuries. They typically want their singers to be successful singing in the operatic style, so they often seek a full, operatic sound as their preferred “singer’s sound,” no matter the style of music or the size of the instrument.

What do they both want? Is there common ground? Choral conductors and voice teachers want their students to experience great masterworks. Choral conductors may assign a wider variety of music spanning all periods—voice teachers typically assign vocal music that has been written in the nineteenth through twenty-first centuries, with some emphasis on Baroque and Classical compositions. In addition, both voice teachers and choral conductors typically have a list of “must-do” pieces in their minds, often pieces they performed as soloists or in choir as undergraduates or graduates. They come to their teaching with preconceived notions of what constitutes great masterworks, based upon their experiences and education. The problem for conductors: most select and order their music in the summer; usually without full knowledge of exactly who will be in their ensemble in the fall. Then, when the students come back to school, the music is rehearsed, whether that repertoire is appropriate to that particular group of singers—considering their ability, musicianship, and mental maturity—or not. The problem for voice teachers and their “must-do” list: these pieces often become requisite selections for various jury levels, and are imposed on singers at that level, whether the repertoire is appropriate to that particular singer—considering his or her ability, musicianship, mental maturity, size of instrument—or not.

Voice teachers and choral conductors have studied and sung great vocal and choral masterworks, and program them for their singers because they are fabulous pieces, often not realizing that the music may be beyond the technical and musical abilities of their singer at the moment. Voice teachers and choral conductors want to feel needed and appreciated in their efforts that contribute to their student’s vocal development. In particular, as part of the team, voice teachers want to be consulted when a choral conductor is contemplating assigning vocal solos in choral repertoire.

That great masterworks exist in solo and choral realms is not the issue. No one is arguing that those Verdi arias are not fabulous, or that a Handel oratorio does not deserve performance. The wisdom comes in knowing that some great masterworks are appropriate for some students, but not all great masterworks are appropriate for all students at any one time.

When inflexibilities exists, e.g., the voice teacher who assigns those Verdi arias to her freshmen, the choral conductor who instructs his graduate vocal performance majors to sing that Handel oratorio with no vibrato throughout its three hour duration, it may be necessary to ask a neutral third party to intervene, so the students’ best interests will be upheld. Again, acknowledging that no one holds the golden ticket to the one, “right” answer can be useful in beginning conversations and creating positive voice teacher/choral conductor partnerships.

### Complaint #4

**Voice Teacher:** “That choral director placed my soprano in the alto section.”

**Choral Conductor:** “The student has the range necessary to sing the lower part with ease. She will gain in musical development and can contribute to the ensemble’s success.”

**Simonson:** There are many reasons a choral conductor might place a soprano voice on a lower part. Obvious reasons begin with the reality that a large, full, more dramatic voice with a significant distribution of energy in the singer’s formant region could easily pierce the fabric of a delicate ensemble blend. Additional reasons may be the student is incapable of producing the necessary dynamic control or the student might be incapable of sufficiently controlling her vibrato to meet the conductor’s requirements. Other reasons might include a lack of space availability and issues of section balance, the need for more musical skills in other sections, or even curricular requirements. Of course, there are as many reasons as there are individuals making those choices. Every justifiable reason does, however, have consequences for the individual being moved.

Voice classification is not always an exact science. We are all familiar with those “Tweener” voices that are either wonderfully long in range, or short and await technical development. In many of those cases, time and training are key. For purposes of this discussion, let us assume that the instrument in question is the full-voiced, certifiable soprano voice. In this instance, the prospect of spending four to five hours a week for a thirty-week school year in a range significantly lower than her instrument’s optimal tessitura can be daunting in the least. Working a lower, thicker, heavier production for a tessitura can be daunting in the least. Working a lower, thicker, heavier production for even a few weeks can easily counteract and undo months of technical achievement. In the worst case scenario, a voice can be damaged to the degree that months of remediation are required just to return to ground zero. In our roles as educators, we
must, above all else, do no harm.

So, how do we solve this dilemma? The first rule in such circumstances should always be communication. Communicate with the student’s voice teacher first, before the topic has been broached with the student. As we know, students do not always respond to suggestions from those in positions of power and respect with insight and reason. As voice teachers, we must be willing to listen to our choral conducting colleagues and understand their unique problems. As professionals, we should be able to resolve these issues with our students’ best interests clearly foremost in our minds. It is possible for a soprano to sing a lower part, it might even be beneficial to their individual vocal development, but it should be a united decision between choral conductor and voice teacher. There might be other solutions as well. Perhaps the best choice would be to have the singer perform with a less select choir, or an ensemble more suited to her individual vocal characteristics, e.g., opera chorus ensemble. Other possibilities abound. Let us think creatively and collaboratively with our students’ best interests always in mind.

**COMPLAINT #5 REHEARSAL TECHNIQUE**

Voice Teacher: “What do choral conductors mean about ‘limitations on time’? They have our singers for four hours every week. We only have 60 minutes with them weekly. In the end, it is the solo performance that counts.”

Choral Conductor: “The voice teachers don’t understand my limitations on rehearsal time.”

Smith: As a choral conductor, I wish my rehearsals to be well organized and timely in content. I want every rehearsal to contribute to the well being of each singer. I am eager to hear my musical ideas realized in the choral sound and the phrase shapes I encourage. Choral repertoire demands maximum concentration. I must give frequent breaks to save voices—but I must fill those breaks with activity, or the singers are bound to talk/whisper/text/twitter. In the end, I want our work to build to a valuable performance experience.

As a singing teacher, I wish my solo singer to be practicing good habits as much as possible. Singing in a seated position is a tremendous challenge. I want my student to breathe deeply, easily and to use the air inhaled to produce beautiful, free tone. In the studio, we work diligently to learn the music, vocal technique, and interpretation methodically. Our goal is to have the music and poetry so well prepared that there will be time to rest before performances, time to immerse one’s self in the artistry of the music.

Solution: The choral conductor has many singers in mind at one time. The singing teacher works one-on-one. The student must be taught by both music educators to concentrate, to be responsible for his/her vocal technique, and to rest the voice between periods of vocal exertion.

**COMPLAINT #6 DYNAMICS**

Voice Teacher: “The choir conductor is asking my students to sing pianissimo all the time—they should be allowed to sing with their full voices.”

Choral Conductor: “The voice teachers are asking my students to sing too aggressively—their voices stick out in my choir.”

McCoy: These two issues are on opposite ends of the spectrum: being asked to sing as a group at a dynamic level that is barely sustainable by a single voice, and to sing at high dynamic levels, often while minimizing or eliminating vibrato. This latter element is exacerbated by expecting sopranos to sing pure vowels for pitches above G5. If we venture briefly into the realm of physics, we learn that objective amplitude measures show that ten singers or instrumentalists are required to produce twice the loudness—distinct from amplitude—of one. The ten to one ratio is a constant, and is a limiting factor on the absolute quietest and loudest sounds an ensemble can produce. Issues of loudness are further complicated by the typical objective dynamic ranges of singers. Gifted professional singers typically have dynamic range of at least 40dB (lowest to highest amplitude), measured across their pitch and dynamic range. Pitches in the upper half of the range may have limited potential for true pianissimo—pros often create the illusion of pianissimo through articulation. The overall dynamic range of amateur singers usually will be significantly lower than 40dB, and these singers are likely to attempt to sing extremely quietly by suppressing airflow and tightening the vocal mechanism, leading to strain and fatigue. Might better ensemble sound be achieved by terracing dynamics through reducing or adding numbers, similar to an organist adding or removing ranks to achieve dynamic contrast?

Sustained, non-fatiguing, loud singing requires vocal freedom, and vocal freedom results in vibrato. If vibrato is withheld, muscle tension must increase to inhibit the normal long-term oscillation that occurs in the pulmonary and phonatory systems. Most singers can suppress vibrato for brief periods with few ill effects. But, especially at high amplitudes, non-vibrato singing is likely to lead quickly to vocal fatigue. This is exacerbated for sopranos when they are instructed to maintain phonetically pure vowels in high tessitura. Acoustics demonstrate the gradual disappearance of pure vowels as pitch ascends through the treble clef and beyond, which is explained through the relationship between fundamental frequency and vocal tract formants that are required for vowel production. As a reminder, when the first formant of any vowel is significantly lower than the pitch being sung, vowel accuracy diminishes or disappears. Insisting that pure vowels be maintained on high pitches, especially at loud dynamics, is a recipe for vocal fatigue and potential injury. The singers are attempting to produce the impossible, usually resulting in significant increases in physical tension.

So how does one deal with larger voices in the total dynamic spectrum? As voices develop, amplitude tends to increase for the maxima and minima. Often, the quietest
sound that a large-voiced singer can produce on a given pitch actually is at higher amplitude than the loudest sound that can be produced at the same pitch by a person of more modest voice size. The typical solution is to move the “loudbite” to a lower section in the ensemble, or have him/her lip sync in the quieter passages, neither of which may foster the vocal and musical development of the singer. Might it be in everyone’s interest to find an alternative ensemble experience for these kinds of singers, enabling them to grow musically in an environment that better nurtures their particular vocal gifts? The odds are, the singing teacher, conductor, and—most importantly—the student will all be happier.

**COMPLAINT #7 VOCAL FATIGUE**

**Voice Teacher:** “My students come from choir rehearsal and are totally worn out for their lesson.”

**Choral Conductor:** “The voice teacher keeps telling several of my sopranos just to mouth the words.”

**Henderson:** While instrumentalists are often able to play for long periods and practice for hours, the fact that singers’ bodies are their instrument creates certain limitations in order for the voice to remain healthy and function at the highest level possible. In choral and opera rehearsals we, as directors and producers, often mislead ourselves and create conflict due to one simple mistake: we treat every voice that enters our door equally. In fact, all voices are not created equal. We are so concentrated on the overall product that the individual often disappears from the equation.

When we talk about vocal fatigue, experts agree that there are two types of fatigue in the laryngeal area:

**Muscle fatigue:** Muscles in the larynx and in the neck can get tired just like muscles in our legs, arms or abs. Unfortunately, the muscles used to phonate don’t signal fatigue in the same way our leg muscles do. As laryngeal muscles fatigue, they often call upon the larger muscles in the neck for stabilization or assistance. The result is that we often do not “feel” fatigue until we are past the stage when we should have stopped.

**Tissue fatigue:** Tissue fatigue occurs when the vocal fold mucosa starts to swell after demanding use. When swollen, the vocal folds become stiffer and vibrate less evenly. This changes our sound, possibly making it more breathy or rougher sounding.

Even in a perfect world in which our students would go to bed at 11PM each night, avoid yelling at athletic or concert events, and avoid alcohol, tobacco, and drug experimentation, we would still have to deal with vocal fatigue. D.D. Michael of the Lions Voice Clinic in Minnesota lists several concepts of help to us in this area:

• Like our bodies, our voices have individual strengths and weaknesses;

• Some vocal mechanisms are made of “cast iron,” some are made of porcelain;

• Cast iron is not better than porcelain. A delicate vocal mechanism can be a good thing;

• Don’t compare one person’s vocal endurance to another’s;

• Louder voices are not necessarily more talented.

What are some possible solutions? We can more easily avoid conflict by:

• Maintaining variety in rehearsal: dynamic, stylistic, sectional;

• Reserving time for cool down and warm up;

• Looking as well as listening in rehearsal. What indicators do you see in rehearsals that may indicate vocal fatigue: poor head/neck alignment, smaller voices being stressed by sitting next to a larger voices, etc. Are you aware what negative effects your desires to produce a certain sound may be producing on individuals;

• Having regular communication among colleagues about what we see and hear in lessons and rehearsals will benefit all parties involved;

• Holding weekly, monthly, or once a semester vocal distress meetings as necessary. Long and short term planning involving all parties preparing our singers will help monitor and anticipate possible times when intervention may be needed;

• Remembering that our students are still learning to manage their voices and rely on our guidance to develop them; and

• And finally—remembering that poor planning on our part does create vocal emergency on our students’ part.

**COMPLAINT #8 TERMINOLOGY**

**Voice Teacher:** “The singers in my private studio are always asked to ‘tone it down,’ taking the ‘soloist’ out of the voice by reducing the singer’s formant and inhibiting their natural vibrato.”

**Choral Conductor:** “Voice teachers tell my students I am asking them to sing too quietly in the piano passages, and with too little vibrato in the loud passages.”

**McCoy:** From both conductors and singing teachers, misunderstanding of voice acoustics and vocal resonance is pervasive. This is particularly apparent concerning the use of nasality and the application of the term formant. Nasality produces sensations that resemble those of well-place resonance. Nasality also gives the illusion that high frequencies are enhanced (in most cases, they...
actually are attenuated with nasality). It is not possible to resonate in the nose without the sound actually going out through the nose, resulting in actively nasal sound quality.

As I previously mentioned, the interaction of formants with the pitch that is being sung strongly impacts diction and vowel integrity. However, formants, and particularly the singer’s formant, are widely misunderstood. They are like the wind: we can see what it does, but cannot see the wind itself. We can hear what formants do to the sound through intensification of harmonics, but the actual formant is as transparent as the wind.

In quality singing, the singer’s formant actually is not as ubiquitous as might be thought. For example, voice analysis shows that Placido Domingo produced his ringing sounds through powerful amplification from the singer’s formant; Luciano Pavarotti, on the other hand, emphasized frequencies a full octave lower. But, if a vocalist does possess a singer’s formant, it often cannot be turned on and off except by compromising vocal technique through laryngeal elevation or partial abduction of the glottis.

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**COMPLAINT #9**

**VOCAL “GOLD”**

(NEEDLESS REPETITION)

Voice Teacher: “I hear the choir rehearsing the same phrase over and over, wasting vocal gold through needless repetition.

Choral Conductor: “If singers are vocal athletes, I need to work on timing and stamina like a sports coach would. If we have to repeat sections to get everyone on task, it simply must be done.”

Smith: Robert Shaw encouraged all singers to save their “vocal gold”—meaning, to pace themselves. As a choral conductor, I want my singers to come to rehearsal ready to sing—physically, mentally, and vocally. I must be careful to remember that forty minutes of practicing is considered the outside limit before a voice requires at least fifteen minutes of rest. I must organize my rehearsal plans in such a way that I allow individual sections of the choir to rest their voices while doing a musical activity (tapping/clapping/snapping rhythms, sitting quietly). I must pace myself so I teach the music in a didactic manner that causes the details to stick, so that frequent
repetition is not required. I must accept the physical, mental, and vocal state of my choir and work within the framework of their abilities on a given day. My rehearsal must be disciplined, but not tense. I should organize all rehearsals with an eye to vocal problems in the music and develop tools to solve those problems. My goals for the rehearsal must be adjusted as we work so the singers should leave the rehearsal with a sense of accomplishment.

As a singing teacher, I hope the conductor will help my student learn the choral repertoire, using my student’s fine mind more than her voice. I will teach my student how to sing lightly with a well-supported tone. I will encourage her not to talk or whisper between works and to check her posture often. I will suggest to my student that she always warm up before going to choir rehearsal, so she is in touch with her voice. When the conductor asks for repetitions that seem stressful, my student will have tools to protect her vocal “gold,” whether it be singing down the octave, singing just the vowels of the words without consonants, lip trilling rather than singing. I will also encourage her to plan vocal rest after long rehearsals and physical rest during concert weeks.

**COMPLAINT #10 OUTSIDE ACTIVITIES**

Voice Teacher: "The choir tour always rules and my students have to miss NATS auditions and other competitions."

Voice Teacher: "The high school musical was scheduled the same weekend as NATS/MTNA/Music Club auditions, preventing my students from participating."

Choral Conductor: "During opera staging and tech week I basically lose two weeks of productive rehearsal because my singers are simply worn out."

Choral Conductor: "I hear from students: ‘We are having a NATS competition and so I cannot sing in choir today.’"

Henderson: Let’s face it, we are in a field that, at its basic level, is about communication through music and yet we seem to have trouble communicating with each other; resulting in comments such as those above. To those who are high school directors:

Have you thought of involving some of the independent voice teachers who teach your students in annual planning so that you are aware of local and regional voice competitions in which your students wish to participate? Support those who are helping develop individual voices in your ensembles. Their success is your success. To those who are college/university faculty: annual planning should involve ensemble directors, opera staff, and voice teachers. “Ensemble Committees” pervade in current structures and often exclude voice studio representation and even opera programs from the scheduling equation. Faculty might consider scheduling cycles for major works, larger operas, tours etc. An opera workshop tour is just as likely to recruit quality voices as a choir tour; but both in the same semester can be a recipe for disaster. Realize that the inevitable special opportunity—ACDA, MENC, NOA performance, etc. will happen. Develop an agreed-upon plan for how such opportunities will be considered. Do all colleagues in the voice area even know when you submit materials for consideration? Most NATS activities are planned well in advance or happen at a common time each year. Many choral events do as well.

We probably have missed one of your top ten complaints, but we hope we have touched on a variety of common issues voice teachers and choral directors face when sharing students. We also hope you will take to heart some of our suggestions for ways to forge common ground as we work toward the end of building a common language that reflects our common goal of providing excellence in instruction and performance.

**NOTES**


2. Ibid.