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Vocal Health During the Voice Change: Recollections and Recommendations of Collegiate Male Choral Singers

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to gather the textual and visual narratives of undergraduate males about their singing experiences during the adolescent voice change. Analysis explored these students' reasons for participation (or not) in secondary choral music, their self-perceptions as singers, and of their vocal maturation process. Much current research focuses on the attrition of young males from school choral music education during the middle and high school years. One purpose of this study was to extend the population to collegiate-aged male singers, with a focus on factors related to vocal health.

The forty-nine participants ranged in age from 17 to 35 and represented two university choral programs, one in the United States and one in Ecuador. Participants contributed through written questionnaires, individual interviews, and focus group discussions. Analysis highlighted six thematic categories concerning the role of peers, masculinity, standards of musical excellence, singing versus choral music, perceptions of the voice change, and the longitudinal singing experience of individual singers throughout the span of adolescence into young adulthood. This report focuses on issues related to participants' perceptions of the voice change, vocal health, and pedagogy. Forty-two of the participants (86%), unprompted, recommended that choral teachers of adolescent males offer instruction specific to vocal health and singing during the voice change.

Keywords: vocal health, adolescence, males, narrative, changing voice, choral pedagogy

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This study drew together the narratives of undergraduate males about their singing experiences during the adolescent voice change. Analysis explored these students' reasons for participation (or not) in secondary choral music, and their self-perceptions both as singers and of the vocal maturation process. Much current research focuses on the attrition of males from school choral music education during the middle and high school years (from approximately ages 10 to 17). One purpose of this study was to extend the population to collegiate-aged male singers, with a focus on factors related to vocal health.

Where there was only minimal related research a decade or two ago, the complementary research base now includes narratives from adolescent males drawn from multiple countries across five continents. There has been no comparable study of post-adolescent males about either their adolescent experiences of voice change or their current singing activity. Kennedy's 2002 study with male singers in junior high school was the first formal narrative study relating the perceptions of adolescent male singers about the voice change. Kennedy's study took place in the United States, and many related studies have followed (e.g., Ashley, 2013; Elorriaga, 2011; Hall, 2015). The current study drew participants from the United States and Ecuador. There has not been a study collecting narratives of male singers in Ecuador, where music education is notably lacking the involvement of adolescent male singers in vocal/choral music programs. The narratives generated by this project were analyzed to discern similarities and differences between the self-stories of the post-adolescent participants from the United States and Ecuador, the perceptions of adolescent males in the existing research base, and the "possible selves" framework of identity development developed by Markus and Nurius (1986). The possible selves construct draws on century-old antecedents for its conceptions of hoped-for selves, feared selves, and expected selves (Oyserman & James, 2011). Research about possible selves suggests that adolescent males need to feel that a hoped-for self is both proximal and attainable for there to be any motivational effect (Freer, 2010, 2015; Munro, 2011; Packard & Conway, 2006). Previous research in choral music suggests that a positive perception of vocal skill is necessary for young males to envision a possible self that involves singing and/or choral ensemble participation (Freer, 2010, 2015, 2016).

This study utilized a form of participatory visual research methodology (Chalfen, 2011; Mitchell et al., 2011) in which participants were asked to develop drawings in response to specific prompts directed by the research questions. In this case, participants were prompted to draw images depicting various points in their vocal/choral development. They were then asked to provide written commentary and contextualization about their drawings. The resulting textual and visual data were analyzed for themes, categories, consistencies, and contradictions. This approach was followed in an earlier study of young adult male singers and nonsingers in Singapore (Freer & Tan, 2014). The methodology of the Singaporean

study allowed for the positing of hypotheses, of which two were influential in the development of the current study. First, the study found that high-quality vocal instruction was critical to Singaporean males' personal decisions to remain enrolled. Second, the absence of instruction about how to sing during the voice change led to the decision of some participants to withdraw from choral singing. These two findings relate directly to the elements of proximity and attainability that are keystones of the possible selves framework (Oyserman et.al, 2006). For adolescent male singers, then, the process of voice change needs to be understood by the singer (proximity) and addressed through a continual process of skill development (attainability).

In the present study, participants were not directly asked about their gender, birth-assigned sex, or sexuality. One participant offered a self-identification that they considered themselves to be non-binary. Several participants mentioned that they identified as gay. Topics related to sexuality did not emerge as prominent themes in the analysis. The pronouns they/them/their are used in this article. Except where noted, the word "male" references and assumes birth-assigned sex. Direct quotations were not altered. The study was conceptualized to address two research questions related to proximity and attainability:

- 1) How do university-age male choral singers recall understanding their adolescent voice change?
- 2) What recommendations do they have for vocal/choral pedagogy during the period of the adolescent voice change?

Participants and Data

Participants in this study represented two urban university choral programs in different countries. The study participants ($N = 49$) were enrolled in non-auditioned choirs open to anyone interested in singing. This population represented the total enrollment of undergraduates ($n = 37$) in the tenor-bass chorus of a university in the southeastern United States and a volunteer group of singers ($n = 12$) in the choral program of a large university in central Ecuador. I selected the two universities because I had opportunity to teach at both; the institutions were of comparable size and academic scope, and the corresponding choral departments had similar breadth and enrollments. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 35.

Participants each contributed two written questionnaires. Based on the depth and specificity of their responses, I selected six participants from both locations to contribute two 30-minute individual interviews and join a 60-minute focus group. The first questionnaire opened with 24 short-answer, open-ended questions oriented toward self-perceptions of singing and choral music from past, present, and future perspectives. The final item was a request for each participant to draw a picture of themselves as a younger singer and then to explain the drawing through words. The second questionnaire consisted entirely of three

prompts for visual/textual pairings depicting “the singer you are today,” “the singer you’d like to be in the future,” and “the singer you’d like to avoid becoming.” Interview questions followed the active interview format (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995) and centered on the experience of these participants with singing, both in-school choirs and in other contexts.

I collected all data on-site and in-person. I hired a Spanish-English translator who assisted on occasion during data collection in Ecuador. The translator checked the interview transcriptions and questionnaire data for accuracy prior to data analysis. Three Ecuadorian participants were subsequently contacted via WhatsApp to clarify and/or confirm their translated comments. The research integrity bureaus of both universities approved the research protocols and subsequent data handling procedures. Pseudonyms are used throughout this report.

Previous research methods in music education have augmented written or interview data with visual data such as participant-generated drawings (e.g., Freer & Bennett, 2012; Freer & Tan, 2014). The current study was built on the analytical techniques detailed in this existing literature. Analysis of visual data followed a social semiotic method (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) while narrative data were analyzed according to the possible selves construct (Markus & Nurius, 1986). The overall analysis utilized principles of a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 2002), revealing six thematic categories concerning the role of peers, masculinity, standards of musical excellence, singing versus choral music, perceptions of the voice change, and the longitudinal singing experience of individual male vocalists throughout the span of adolescence into young adulthood. Three factors emerged as determinants in these participants’ attitudes: (a) the teacher (personality and interest in male singers, appropriate pedagogical techniques, and educational philosophy), (b) the level of musicianship (overall attention to craft, standards, and detail that results in aesthetic satisfaction and pride), and (c) the social component (determined by the strength of peer support for singing and the positive influence of male singing role models).

The next two sections of this report relate the narrative information contributed by two representative study participants, followed by examples from the broader study’s data and findings specific to vocal health and pedagogy. The reported data were compiled from the completed questionnaires, individual interviews, and focus group interviews.

Two Singer Portraits

Red

Red was a 20-year-old psychology student in the tenor-bass choir at the participating university in the United States. Red referred to himself as a “boy” and a “man” in the narrative data, hence the use of “he,” “his,” etc., in this portrait. Red considered himself a singer, but it was not normally something he chose to do. His primary motivation for joining tenor-bass chorus was to make friends. One reason for Red’s reluctance to sing more was,

as he stated:

My voice is still changing. People sometimes think I'm a woman when I talk. It's very embarrassing. In choir, I look forward most to getting a chance to practice and maybe improve my singing skills. Also, a chance of improving my socialization. I'm awfully shy around others.

Red related that skill played a role in the process of socialization: "I'm slowly becoming part of the chorus more and more, in terms of skill and confidence." Red's drawings indicated that he was bothered by what he perceives as a limited vocal range and inability to sing using falsetto. He commented that,

My drawings just show in general how I feel about singing (good) and my voice (bad) and my perceived issues (shyness). I can continue to improve through self-study and peer support . . . I don't want to hide in the shadows of the choir anymore. I'll stop singing if the evaluation of my voice is very critical or if I feel my abilities are not good enough to be a contributing member of the tenor-bass chorus.

During his interviews, Red offered several consecutive thoughts that led toward realization that his lack of singing confidence began at the time of his adolescent voice change.

I haven't done any public performance since elementary school. That's quite a long gap from elementary school to college and so I didn't do any, I guess, in-school music education or training or any clubs or any kind of things that would let me really connect to music. I signed up for tenor-bass chorus last fall 'cause my friend kind of goaded me into it. I wanted to join chorus because I wanted to get back into singing music and also because I wanted to improve on self-esteem, confidence and try my hand at socializing a little bit better too.

So, I guess I've become a little bit better about the singing. I still admit I get fairly shy. Maybe that's why I'm not singing full or high range because I still kinda shy away and maybe I don't wanna be heard by everybody or heard by the others. I'm already on the threshold of adulthood, and so it just feels so late in the game to get good at singing, even though I desperately want to. I've already missed all this time, all these years, from elementary to now . . . how can I possibly . . . how can I play catch-up time this late in time?

And that's the difficult thing about voice, I'd say. Yes, it is a type of instrument but it's not the type of instrument that's physical; that you can hold in your

hand; you can constantly practice with your fingers and hands. It's an internal thing. You have to have really good body control. You have to really be able to know and be oneself with your body to be able to do singing. It's not an outside mechanism. I think I lacked in the area of singing technique going through puberty and the voice change, since I didn't have anyone to help me make that transition. My teacher didn't know what to do with the boys, so she just ignored us. So that's probably why it's giving me difficulty now. On the other hand, chorus is like a team effort in a huge group voice class. We work as a group, but then we break down into individuals. I like that.

Andreas

Andreas was a 26-year-old law student at his university in Ecuador who referred to himself as a “man” in the narrative data, hence the use of “he,” “his,” etc. in this portrait. He was a bass in the university choir and he, like the other members, was fiercely proud of the ensemble's musical accomplishments. He said, “People here in general don't give too much value to arts. It's not a good thing because you might become more ‘sensitive’ if you practice the arts. People who say those things just can't understand how good we are!”

Andreas was most animated during the focus group interview with several buddies. One participant provoked a loud and boisterous discussion by suggesting that all singers in the choir's bass section needed to sound alike. Andreas disagreed, and spoke about the conductor's relationship to the singing of choral members:

It is important that the conductor allows you to sing ... to make music. Through this, you can find your sense of yourself, you can express the spirituality of the music and what you have inside ... not just to sing beautifully or on a specific note in a technical and perfect way. The most important thing is to find our individual and essential sound. As humans, we grow with music since birth. This is how you connect with and transmit music with others. It is all about what can do with your voice. Choral music is all about the singer, and the singer is all about singing.

The Ecuadorian participants noted that choral singing was not widespread in Ecuador's public schools. Most of the participants began their formal music training with the university choir. Andreas recalled singing in civic and church ceremonies as a boy. He said,

In my family, I always sang. There was one period of my teenager life when I started to notice the crack of my voice, but my family never told me that I was wrong or was a bad singer. So, I always felt free to sing. That's why I never stopped singing at home. It was different in school. I had a choir in school since I was nine years old. I stopped singing when my voice started to change. It was my

decision because I did not feel comfortable singing the high notes that the teacher wanted me to sing. I could only sing middle notes. The songs did not fit my voice anymore and she did not teach me anything about how to sing correctly. I started again when my voice was lower. I felt that I was starting from zero, from nothing, because when I sang as a kid I sang one way, and then I needed to learn all over again.

If I was a music teacher for kids, one of the most important things would be to choose the best repertoire for the boys. Then I would need to be an expert about how to guide the boys and teach them the importance of the changing voice, the muscles, the physical. So, I would need to learn it first, not just speak about my own experience. And, also, the director must be an expert on how to teach kids, specifically, because it's not the same as teaching adults.

Proximity and Attainability of Singing Success

Proximity

Proximity was defined in this study as understanding the process of voice change so that singers know what is occurring, why it is happening, and what they will experience next. In this sense, proximity is related to self-efficacy, or the belief that one has the knowledge and skills to succeed. Several researchers have examined impact of specificity or generality of the hoped-for success in terms of providing the requisite motivation for action (de Place & Brunot, 2020; Oyserman et al., 2004). In this study, proximity referred to both the specificity of “how do I manage my changing voice with the music I need to sing today?” and the generality of “how will my changed voice become part of me and my adult musical identity?”

No Ecuadorian participant could describe the process of voice change or how to optimize the vocal capabilities afforded by the change. Some boys, like Raphael (age 17, Ecuador), attributed the adolescent voice change to cigarette smoking, a common habit begun in adolescence. The participants were asked if they thought more young males would be interested in singing if they knew the anatomy and physiology of the changing voice. All Ecuadorian interview participants ($n = 6$) responded affirmatively, including Gorki (age 17, Ecuador), who stated, “Yes, of course. My voice changed early, at 10 years, and I stopped singing. Nobody could tell me what was happening, really. I had to ask my father.” As a result, Gorki was able to confidently state that the voice change occurred “Because we grew up [points to throat]. We got more muscles for singing. Our cords got thicker.”

David (age 18, Ecuador) interjected that their mother was a music teacher who specialized in working with adolescent male singers, with an emphasis on encouragement and matching the vocal lines of repertoire with the vocal tessitura of the singers. Gorki responded that it did not matter if the teacher is a man or woman, rather “It's important that the

teacher explains to students how our body works like the muscles and like in an anatomic way, so they could teach them how it works.” Patricio (age 22, Ecuador) stopped singing during the voice change and only began again when a friend encouraged them to join the university choir. They had never had any singing lessons. Patricio stated, “It’s important to know that, for example, a woman cannot teach or explain the singing technique to a guy and a man director to a girl. Because of lack of familiarity.” A furious discussion followed among the participants in Patricio’s focus group, with Patricio conceding that their opinion was grounded in a stereotype, and they might be incorrect.

Dirk (age 23, USA) related that they felt well-informed about the forthcoming voice change. Dirk “gradually changed from whatever boys sing in elementary school, to tenor, then to baritone. I felt like it was natural. I knew what would happen, because my choir teachers kept me informed as to the changes that would occur.” However, Dirk was unable to provide any specific information about the process of voice change itself. Dirk felt that a general awareness was sufficient. Sam (age 22, USA), however, argued that they “would have been interested in the physiology of singing long before my voice began to change.” Sam related being “interested in sports, mostly because they taught me about my body and how to use my new muscles and strength. The same should have been true of singing during adolescence.”

At age 17, Juan (Ecuador) was one of the youngest participants in this study. Juan cleared their throat frequently while speaking, commenting, “It is a hurt in my voice since I was 14. The only time it stops is after we warmup in choir practice. I wish I understood my voice and what I could do to help it.” Paul (age 19, USA) concurred: “The voice cracks were terrible. I wish I knew what caused them. I’ve learned about this from my university chorus director. I wish he had been there to tell me about this when I was 12 years old!” Bruce (age 21, USA) agreed that their adolescent voice, “was rough and cracked a lot. Nobody taught me anything about my voice. I thought that’s what music teachers were for. It made me both sad and mad.”

While many of the participants communicated that they thought the coming voice change was something every prepubescent male knew about and expected, some of the participants expressed being unprepared for their voice change. “After my voice started changing, I decided I would never like the sound of my voice,” said Alex (age 19, USA), adding, “I had no idea why my voice had to change from what was probably a decent voice when I was a little boy soprano.” Alex continued, “but around age 17, people began complimenting my singing, which confused me. I only recently accepted that I’m not completely untalented.” James (age 22, USA) could not figure out why their voice timbre “got deeper but I remained a tenor. That’s OK, but I don’t know why my pitches didn’t change much. I wish my voice had changed more. I hoped I would end up being a baritone. It’s more expected of adult men.” Chuck (age 24, USA) agreed, wishing they’d had some instruction about the voice change because they kept wanting to switch to “my new octave range” and was frustrated when they did not gain many lower pitches. Chuck wanted a teacher to explain this to them. Saffron (age 28, USA) simply stopped singing and waited until the change process had stopped. They currently sing alto with the university treble choir and baritone with the tenor-bass

choir. Saffron recalled, “I really don’t remember when my voice broke – I’ve always been soft-spoken and used to sing prior to high school, then I stopped for almost 8 years. When I started singing again, I was a baritone.” They added, “That was simple, but maybe not a great strategy. A teacher could have helped me know how to make better choices about singing.” Dany (age 18, Ecuador) commented from another perspective:

My case was different. I sang from age five in my church choirs, and then in school. But my voice change was when I was 13 years old. I had a very high voice, and then it was like an extreme change. It was a shock. I was so comfortable on high notes, and I stopped singing when I was 14 and then one year later, I returned to singing because of an older friend. I had a friend who encouraged me to continue singing. He helped me. I then started to sing as a principal vocalist in a band with my friends. The best part was that I could choose the notes for me to sing! But I thought I could still sing the high notes if I just used more muscles in my throat. So, I forced the voice until it hurt me. I lost my voice – I couldn’t sing or talk for a while. In that moment, I stopped singing for about six months; I had to quit the band. I couldn’t sing in a good way. It was really difficult for me. I suffered from the voice change for several years. I did not have a good teacher to help me. Now I belong to the university choir where there are some teachers who can teach vocal technique. But I needed that help when I was 13!

Thirty-eight (78%) participants spoke about the influence of verbal praise on their sense of musical self-efficacy. Jack (age 23, USA) traced their current level of singing confidence to a single comment from their high school choral director, offered during their freshman year: “Jack, your voice is really coming along, it’s really developing nicely, especially your tone quality.” Jack added, “he was like a father figure to me, very specific guidance yet very encouraging . . . I was struggling with self-esteem, but he helped me find direction in my singing and my life.”

Complimentary comments about the participants’ singing often came from teachers, but they also came from family members. John (age 19, USA) related how,

As a boy in pre-K, my class sang “I Believe I Can Fly” for our parents. I’ve never been so happy as I was that day, singing for my father’s smiling face. He said I had a wonderful voice! Now I sing loud and proud, shining out for everyone. I do it because I love expressing myself through music and helping others feel like I do. I want to sing and make music all my life.

Pedro (age 19, Ecuador) recalled singing with their father: “Yes. It was a beautiful thing. One time, when I was 11, when we traveled from Quito to Loja, it was long trip, over two

hours. We sang the whole time. It was special.” Pedro vividly recalled sitting in the back seat of the car, with the songs loaded onto a flash drive and arranged into genre-specific folders of “salsa, retro from 1996, and pop.” Pedro described the blue t-shirt and white shorts their father was wearing. When Pedro spoke of this, others in the focus group interjected with similar memories. Jonathan (age 19, Ecuador) once sang a duet with their sister, Imagine Dragons’ “Thunder,” and the memory became indelible when “she told me that I sounded really good, really beautiful. That’s when I decided to sing for my cousins in a family meeting. They loved it. I felt very proud. That’s why I sing today.”

Attainability

Attainability was defined as understanding that vocal skill development involves the continual determination of singing technique goals and an identified process for achieving those goals. This definition suggests that attainability is related to self-agency, or the ability to take necessary actions toward the achievement of desired goals. Oyserman et al. (2004, p. 132) offered:

Possible selves and other self-directed goals can serve to guide and regulate behavior, providing a roadmap connecting the present to the future. The more plans connect self-directed goals to specific strategies, the more likely they are to be carried out.

In this study, attainability referred to participants’ understanding of the strategies necessary for self-identified vocal success and the steps they may have taken to achieve those goals.

Participants largely equated strategies for successful singing with instruction and pedagogy during the voice change. There was no item on the questionnaires that specifically mentioned instruction; the closest was the question, “what would you have liked your teachers to do differently?” Still, 42 of the participants (86%), unprompted, recommended that choral teachers of adolescent males offer instruction specific to vocal health, the voice change itself, and/or singing during the period of change. Sebastian (age 22, Ecuador) said their teachers “reassured me that it [the voice change] was natural and to just wait and see what would come out of it. I wish they’d taught me something about vocal technique, though. Sometimes I wonder how much knowledge they had about the voice themselves.” “I wish I could have learned more about singing techniques and how to practice my voice,” said George (age 18, USA), adding, “I want to be a good singer.” Seamus (age 18, USA) concurred: “I want to have the complete confidence and control necessary to do my own musical work by myself. I’m currently practicing falsetto so I can do this.”

During the interviews, Peter (age 27, USA) asked many questions about vocal skills, such as the development of vibrato, facility with falsetto, and the breath management sufficient to sing long musical phrases. Peter wondered why they had never learned those aspects of singing technique in choir, despite being in choral ensembles for nearly 15 years. Peter felt

that this information would be valuable for male singers before and after the voice change. They said, “Boys need that skill confidence if they’re going to continue singing through a rough period in their lives.” Barry (age 19, USA) joined the university choir to sing for the first time since withdrawing from singing during the voice change. Barry offered:

And so, at first, I was kind of, really just, like, struggling and listening to the people around me to try and adjust my pitch. But I don’t know. I had, I think I had two lessons with my professor over the first two semesters and those were really helpful and kind of just like understanding how to warm up and how to do certain exercises.

“My voice change happened in the first year of high school,” said Jason (age 33, USA). Jason added that they were “frustrated by a blank spot in the vocal range during the change process, but easily navigated around it.” Still, Jason said they would have liked a teacher who could have provided assistance. John (age 19, USA) related that their teacher helped by providing “exercises for the placement of my mouth and body so that I could successfully get through the challenging phases of voice change.” Aaron (age 18, USA) would have appreciated that instruction, as they desired information during adolescence about breath flow and vocal health: “What can damage your voice and what can’t. Most chorus teachers focus on the wrong things, only telling you what not to do instead of what to do.” Some teachers clearly lacked basic knowledge about the male adolescent voice change and, occasionally, foundational vocal technique. Bob (age 20, USA) recalled, “I was the only guy in my choir when my voice changed, and my female teacher did not understand that I couldn’t hit the notes anymore. I think it was obvious, but she had no idea what to do with me.” Huey (age 24, USA) avoided the entire issue, faking extreme pain during chorus class: “I was a funny guy, and it was a convenient way to get out of a situation I found embarrassing.”

Archie (age 17, Ecuador) wanted to join a friend’s band as lead vocalist but was frustrated with their own (Archie’s) lack of vocal skill. Archie independently sought voice lessons from a 20-year-old, widely admired singer in their town. Archie recalled, “I learned lots of nerdy things about breathing and vocalization, rhythm, and other things to improve my vocal technique.” Archie explained that they needed voice lessons because their school music teachers “didn’t explain about music ... they only give the scores, say ‘copy that’ or ‘do this.’” They remembered becoming frustrated when the voice changed: “I was 11 years old, and my voice become very grave [low in pitch]. I thought my voice doesn’t work because I could not control, I sing very bad. I wish I’d been taught how to sing in school.” None of the participants from Ecuador could recall learning any element of vocal technique they’d learned in music class. They could only remember “notes, rhythms, right, and wrong” (Juan, age 17, Ecuador).

Charlie (age 17, Ecuador) commented that if they could have a music teacher who taught how to use the voice, “It would be incredible. The teacher would give the students tech-

niques and what they need to learn to improve. The teacher needs to make music something beautiful. Not just learning about music but making music.” Charlie’s image of the ideal music teacher grew from personal perception that their voice “became horrible when I turned 13.” In response to Charlie’s assessment, Archie offered that “My friend Charlie, he could sing really well because he has a really good pitch. Maybe he only needs vocal coaching. Charlie’s voice isn’t horrible. The music teacher at school made Charlie’s voice horrible because there was no teaching.” Charlie added that they would prefer taking a group voice class to solidify their vocal skills before joining a choir. All five members of the focus group agreed, including Pedro (age 18, Ecuador): “In order to start to learn repertoire, your body must be ready to sing it.” Jonathan (age 19, Ecuador) was asked if they’d ever learned vocal technique in music class. Jonathan answered, “no, but I want that. All boys and men want that, to be confident singers. Teachers forget what it’s like to be awkward and shy. I wish teachers would remember what it was like to be 14 years old.”

Bruce (age 21, USA) offered, “I wish I’d learned better breath control and singing techniques before adolescence, so I did not have to learn them in middle school, especially during the change when I had trouble with basic phonation.” Bruce had sung in the school gospel choir and in church choir before the voice change. When Bruce’s voice began maturing, their teacher told them to simply stop singing. That was unacceptable to Bruce, so they sought guidance from an older friend who secretly gave Bruce voice lessons. Bruce’s confidence returned and they rejoined choral singing in high school. Bruce concluded the interviews with,

And I say, just going through this process of thinking about my voice change and the progress I’ve made over the years, it made me realize where I’ve been, what’s happening to me now and where I’m going with my singing. If I can continue to improve, I can really do something special with my voice.

Not all these singers’ pedagogical experiences were negative. For instance, Tre-Cion (age 22, USA) stated,

My teacher cared about teaching singing so much that he made me care about it. And it’s like, how he cares about it and how he describes it and breaks down how the guy’s voice and how he has so much knowledge about the man’s voice working it out and different stuff like that. That’s amazing! I did not know this affected this, which affected this, which affected that. It makes me feel good because I’m not even ashamed anymore. I was ashamed to sing when I lost my boy soprano voice. Knowledge made me not feel ashamed of my voice or my sound or anything.

James (age 21, USA) concurred, exclaiming, “Voice cracks. Oh my! I wish I had known what they were, why they happened, and what I could do about them. I can’t believe I didn’t learn about this until being in the college men’s chorus!”

Discussion

There is a long tradition of having adolescent males cease singing activity at the time of the voice change, also referenced as the voice break (Ashley, 2013). In the context of the male changing voice, the word “break” can be defined in two ways, as “broken,” or as “taking a break.” The former is not the case, and the latter is unwise. The voice is not broken during adolescence; rather, it transforms into what will eventually become the adult male voice. As the participants in this study highlighted, choral teachers have a responsibility to provide the supports necessary for young males to sing through and beyond the voice change. Our concept of democratic education precludes us from simply dismissing adolescent male singers during the voice change (Dewey, 1916). Further, this study’s participants indicated a desire to sing as their voices changed, with no cessation or break involved.

This study examined how late and post-adolescent male singers reported their knowledge of and experience during the voice change, with emphasis on the impact of teachers’ pedagogy toward the enablement of continued singing. Data were viewed through two lenses consistent with the development of possible, hoped-for future selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986): proximity, or an understanding of the voice change process, and attainability, or the skill development necessary to manage the vocal changes associated with male adolescence.

These collegiate singers spoke repeatedly of the desire for voice education beyond the rehearsal of pitches and rhythms in the concert repertoire under preparation. In their view, choral music provides a vehicle for group voice instruction, with multi-voiced repertoire allowing for differentiation between singers with unique vocal ranges and capabilities. These singers wished that their childhood music teachers had prepared them with information about the voice change process before it had begun. They wanted to know the biological and physiological processes of change, the impact on singing, and a sense of what they would next notice at each step of the maturation process. They wanted to know that they could continue to experience vocal success during and after the voice change. However, some of the study participants voiced concern that their teachers did not know the information themselves. This points to the need for teacher preparation programs to include instruction about the male voice change, along with a renewed emphasis on the basics of vocal technique and pedagogy. These participants were driven by a desire to improve their singing skills; they were less motivated by the preparation and performance of choral repertoire itself.

Singing during voice change is an issue of vocal health, as the participants in this study felt they often lacked the basic information necessary to avoid what Aaron referred to as potentially “doing damage to my vocal folds.” These singers knew that the voice change was a physical process. They knew that singing during the voice change felt different than singing during childhood, resulted in different sounds, and required a coordination of vocal skills that seemed different than those encountered during childhood. They knew they wanted to keep singing and they knew they needed assistance to ensure their vocal health during the voice change journey. Only a few of the participants learned from music teachers who

provided that support. Most teachers either lacked the knowledge themselves, were unsure of how to convey it to young male singers, or entirely ignored the issue of male adolescent vocal health.

Vocal health and vocal technique were viewed as symbiotic by many of the singers in this study. They desired the knowledge necessary to understand their voices, but they were motivated by the development of skills that would improve the quality and experience of their singing. Not each study participant shared these goals, as some were enrolled in the choral ensemble due to curriculum or scheduling requirements rather than by choice. Those who responded with richly detailed written responses to the questionnaire data were uniformly enthusiastic about singing, particularly when they had noted recent improvement in their singing quality. These singers attributed vocal difficulties not to health, but to deficiencies in personal vocal technique. A few study participants expressed frustration that they did not receive the necessary pedagogy in their choral classrooms. Others sought vocal guidance from friends or from independently hired singing instructors. This emphasis on skill development is consistent with other research with males who view themselves as successful singers (Freer, 2018). The singers in the current study were resourceful, but they were, by definition, the singers who had persisted through secondary school to enroll at the collegiate level. They wondered about the singers who simply stopped singing when their voice changed. Would they have continued singing if their teachers had provided the necessary vocal instruction?

The findings of this study are consistent with the possible selves construct of Markus and Nurius (1986), and they echo elements of flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and attribution theory (Asmus, 1986; Legette, 1998). Flow theory posits that optimal experiences are predicated on a balance between the challenge being presented and an individual's ability to meet that challenge. The participants in this study were keen to increase their vocal skills so that they could sing ever more challenging repertoire, often outside of classrooms and choral settings entirely. They wanted to learn vocal skills that they could then transport to other musical settings and genres. Attribution theory holds that individuals ascribe success to various factors, including ability (unchangeable) and effort (changeable). Singers in this study often seemed determined to increase their effort levels to take advantage of even a small chance to improve their vocal success.

One of the most influential voice scientists and pedagogues in the field of male adolescent voice change was John Cooksey. Cooksey gave an interview in which they provided a succinct rationale for pedagogy that supports young male singers before and during their voice change process. Cooksey said (in Hook, 1998, p. 23):

If you educate the boys about voice change and take it out of the unknown, they then know this is going to happen. This is a normal thing ... the boys are going to trust you, they're going to trust each other. That is a healthy thing.

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