

FORWARD

MOTION

How Voices Learn: From Cognition to Aesthetic Experience - Part 3

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USED BY PERMISSION, TAKEN FROM THE MAY 2007 AMERICAN CHORAL DIRECTORS ASSOCIATION'S CHORAL JOURNAL

Solid, Dependable Vocal Technique

WEBSTER'S DICTIONARY DEFINES TECHNIQUE AS "THE METHOD OF PROCEDURE ... IN RENDERING AN ARTISTIC WORK OR CARRYING OUT A SCIENTIFIC OR MECHANICAL OPERATION." It also defines it as "the degree of expertness in following this: as, the pianist had pleasing interpretation but poor technique." Webster's further defines method as "a way of doing anything; mode; procedure; process; especially a regular, orderly, definite procedure or way of teaching, investigating, etc." Therefore, whether a singer studies voice with a teacher or simply "sings," he or she is training the voice via a method (intentional or unintentional) to create a body/voice response for sound. If a person sings in choir but does not take private voice lessons, the choral conductor may be the only "voice teacher" this student has. As such, the choral conductor – especially one trained as a pianist or organist – must have a working knowledge of how sound is produced. Many times, these keyboardists-turned-choral-conductors rely only on what they learned by accompanying in voice studios, passing on overheard, second-hand information as gospel to their choir members.

Inefficient technique learned early on may cause the singer to suffer from a number of vocal problems in the future.

It is useful to compare the training of a beginning instrumentalist to that of a beginning singer. If a person was a beginning trombonist, he or she would first learn the parts of the instrument. The learning process would have specific steps: (a) how to put the instrument together, (b) how to buzz into the mouthpiece, (c) how much air to blow through the instrument to create a tone, (d) how to hold the slide, (e) how to adjust the slides, etc. An instrumental student is taught that by first

knowing their instrument and then knowing how to play, they will become excellent performers. For the instrumental beginner, technique is mastered through

learning with a specific training method, not just by listening to a sound and imitating it (although imitating sound is certainly a part of the training.) Many beginning singers, however, have only one method for learning a song: they mimic sounds by rote, never really learning what their instrument is or how to efficiently play it.

Inefficient technique learned early on may cause the singer to suffer from a number of vocal problems in the future. If the goal is healthy singing for longevity of career, then it is absolutely necessary

continued on page 2

Latest Additions
to the Education
Page on the
Web Site

Barbershop
Basics #4 – Dues/
Membership

Barbershop Basics
#5 – Standing Rules

Basic Criteria for
Public Performance

Sweet Adelines
International
Terminology

Performance Level
Guidelines



to have healthy and efficient technique from the start. In order to have a healthy singing voice, a singer must know how to do the following:

- Sing with healthy technique (i.e., balancing airflow, phonation, resonance, articulation, agility)
- Sing in the correct voice category/range
- Sing in the correct tessitura (pitch area where voice comfortably sits)
- Sing the genre of music with the healthiest possible stylistic tools.

Equally important for the vocal health of the singer is that the choral conductor conduct his or her choir with vocal health in mind. Among other things, the conductor must understand the principles of how the anatomy of the voice works to create sound. He or she must audition members and assign them to appropriate sections. Rehearsals must be planned in advance with the most vocally efficient learning methods. Healthy voice preservation tactics should be taught when students participate in high-use vocalism (musical theater rehearsals, choir tours, extra before and after school rehearsals).

As in any other athletic endeavor, singing is a complex activity of many systems that have to balance. Working basic, pedagogical elements of technique and healthy sound production must precede learning text, melody, rhythm, and harmony together all at once — or jumping ahead to make a song musical.

Conclusion

A choral conductor must have knowledge of healthy voice production, coupled with superior musical knowledge in order to be able to analyze and separate all the various elements that need rehearsing prior to putting a song together. Bennett

Reimer writes that the word “analysis” comes from the Greek word meaning to “loosen up,” and the word “confusion” essentially means “fused together.” Analysis allows us to separate out how things work in order to combat confusion. In the choral rehearsal, it is important to dissect, but Reimer cautions that after dissection we must not leave things picked apart and in disarray, but rather learn to use evaluation to put things back together.

Learning new music whether by rote, traditional staff notation, or the Nashville Number System is a means to an end, that of creating a musical experience. How does the method of choice for reading and learning music affect the voice? It has been my experience as both an observer and participant that too much is expected from a singer all at once with most methods. When the mental focus is divided among too many variables at one time, both musical and vocal problems can occur. Therefore, using the rehearsal tools of working on recurring melodic patterns and recurring rhythmic patterns, using sectionals to learn melodies (parts), and then using creative ways to put it all together again is highly recommended. The choral conductor can use the warm up period at the beginning of rehearsal to underscore both music acquisition and vocal pedagogical skills.

Fundamental skill building in the choral rehearsal begins with the conductor: it is he/she who will teach effectively with respect to building music reading skills, teaching healthy voice use, and who will run efficient rehearsals. The conductor must have knowledge and training in healthy voice production to effectively lead young singers to master the myriad

of skills necessary for lifelong vocal health. Singers have responsibilities, too, including putting into practice healthy vocal technique, and learning their music outside of the rehearsal in order to be prepared for ensemble rehearsal inside. In the end, however, it is the conductor who is responsible for setting a solid foundation, so that the singers in his or her charge can pass with ease from cognition to replication to the eventual goals of musicality and the aesthetic experience.

Vocal Tips

Courtesy of Lisa Popeil's World's Tiniest Vocal Newsletter — February 2008

Vocal Tip

Avoid drinking coffee or black tea before singing — they're dehydrating to the vocal cords. And milk, chocolate or ice cream thickens mucus so it's best to avoid these.

Vocal Technique Tip

If your neck muscle sticks out (the spot 1-2” below your ear) when you sing, you may be tightening your neck too much. Try putting your fingers on either side of your head and check that muscle. Make sure you use proper abdominal support (upper belly out, lower belly in) to relieve your neck of excessive tension.

Video Vocal Tip - Proper Head Position

http://www.popeil.com/video_tips/headposition01.mov



Woodshedding For the Joy of It

By Jim Massey, Director, O.K. City Chorus

I began singing barbershop harmony for the joy of it as a 16-year-old in 1950 with the Big D barbershop chorus in Dallas, Texas. Most of the songs we sang were not written down. We learned a few very specific arrangements; however many songs were sung in a very free style, sing what feels good, manner — it was called woodshedding, and we all did it with great joy!

I became very curious about how to learn more about doing this thing called woodshedding better. The answers were not very specific — “Sing what feels good,” “Don’t step on someone else’s note,” “Listen for the harmony,” “Make the melody sound good,” etc. So, a decade or so later, I came up with some thoughts for training your ear to the craft of woodshedding.

- **Select an easy slow melody.**
- **All four parts should know that melody.**
- **Beginning steps:**

1. *Tenor, bari, and bass hum a harmony while the lead sings the melody.*
2. *Lead – Hold a melody note until the harmony feels right, then move on to the next note.*
3. *Bass – When your note becomes uncomfortable, be willing to find that other harmony note below the melody,*

that “feels strong” (roots and fifths). Use your ear!

4. *Tenor – Stay mostly above the melody and make generally small moves (half steps, whole steps, thirds, etc.) to the next harmony note that “feels good”. Use your ear!*

5. *Bari – Sing the missing harmony note between the tenor and bass. Use your ear!*

6. *Generally, if someone else is on the note that you’ve chosen, go to another one.*

7. **USE YOUR EAR!**

- **After you’ve waded through that song a few times, begin to agree on the notes for each passage of the song. When you’ve learned the song with all four parts. Sing it for someone and watch their expression.**

All harmony and arranging has its roots in what sounds good to the ear. Later the mechanics are developed. Bach is given credit for being the great creator of consonant harmony rules. Not exactly true. His works were examined and rules were formalized about the natural consonant harmonies he used, and rules were written to describe those ear-pleasing harmonies. Barbershop singers largely subscribe to those rules, because

they sound right to the ear. Bach’s “circle of fifths” (roots of chords descending downward by perfect fifths) is used largely in most songs we sing. Examples: Darkness On The Delta or Five Foot Two in key of C:

C E7 A7 D7 G7 C

“... darkness on the Delta, that’s the time my heart is light, when It’s darkness on the Delta, let me linger...”

“... five foot two, eyes of blue, but oh, what those five foot can do has anybody ... seen my ... gal...”

Our problem comes now when some arrangers are good mechanics of the rules but whose arrangements fail to survive the test of the ear. If it doesn’t sing easily to a woodshedder, chances are the average listener won’t get it either.

In case I haven’t made my point clear — woodshedding is FUN for the singer. *So try it!*



ADVANCEMENTS

ADVANCED TO CERTIFIED DIRECTOR

Donna Moore,
Northern Gateway Chorus,
Region 12

Debbie Welton,
Grand Traverse Chorus,
Region 2

Cheri Bowers,
Greater Harrisburg Chorus,
Region 19

Judy Hendrickson,
Lock Cities Chorus,
Region 2

Susan Reardon,
Song of the Coast Chorus,
Region 9

Tomi McEvoy,
San Diego Chorus,
Region 21

Katie Blackwood,
Liberty Oaks Chorus,
Region 15

Ruth Carmichael,
Grand Harmony Chorus,
Region 2

Janice Caravan,
Desert Sounds Harmony,
Region 26

Evie Caldwell,
Nebraska Pride Chorus,
Region 8

Karen Wilmott,
Wollongong Harmony Chorus,
Region 34

DC: Not Just An Acronym

IES BBS DCP DC DEC

HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW YOUR SWEET ADELINE ACRONYMS? Even if you're brand spanking new to our organization, you'll know what the one at the top of the list stands for! There's one other really important acronym for you, as a director, to know — directors' coordinator! So, you're thinking you're smart now because you already knew what DC stood for. Next question: Who is the DC of your region? Ah ha! If you know that you are an informed Sweet Adeline! Next: What can your DC do for you? A nutshell description of the directors' coordinator position is:

Directors' coordinator (elected by directors in the region) — Assesses and communicates directors' needs within the region and represents the interests of the region's directors on the Regional Management Team.

Wow, that's a short, but hefty job description! Your DC has a big responsibility to serve you, and will do her best to represent you, a chorus director, to her RMT (another important acronym) and to tap the resources offered by Sweet Adelines International to support and provide you with education. For

example, are you a new director who needs advice setting up a music staff? Are you an experienced director who is looking for fresh ways to run rehearsals? Your regional DC is there as your resource!

This brings to mind yet another acronym, DEC, which stands for the Director Education Coordinators. This internationally appointed committee is made up of three members — currently, Harriette Walters, Kim Wonders and Joan Boutilier — who are front-line directors, too. They work together using the resources provided by International to create, implement and monitor Director Education programs such as the Director Mentor Program. The DEC wants to know what's happening at the regional level among directors, and can use the information gained from the DCs to work for you, the director!

In short, there's no need to feel like “the cheese that stands alone” as a director. If you haven't already, find out who your DC is today. Get to know her, communicate with her, and put your hard-earned dues dollars to work.

SWEET ADELINES INTERNATIONAL BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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DIRECTORS

Courtesy of your DEC; Harriette Walters - Moderator, Joan Boutilier & Kim Wonders

Proper Warm-Ups for Strength and Stamina

By Joanna DeGroot, *MENCs Teaching Music*, Feb. 2008 Vol. 15, Nbr. 4

THERE ARE WARM-UPS, AND THEN THERE ARE PROPER WARM-UPS. Done correctly, warm-ups can build vocal strength and stamina. This in turn helps students sing easily and effortlessly with power and control.

Hilary Apfelstadt, professor of choral studies and director of choral activities at Ohio State University, recommends “lip trills” and “hissing out air,” exercises in which students inhale and then exhale on a hiss for an extended length of time.

In some cases, Apfelstadt finds that a specific exercise is useful, such as taking a phrase or segment of a piece that students are working on, keeping it the same melodically, but slowing it down or changing the rhythm.

Paul Nesheim, assistant professor and director of choral activities at Minnesota State University, Moorhead, stresses that strength and stamina of the breath mechanism directly correlate with sound quality. He recommends these breathing exercises:

• The Pant

This exercise is used to develop and increase abdominal muscle coordination and strength to encourage proper phonation and improve tone production, articulation of text, and vocal flexibility. Alternately exhale

and inhale at a steady rate through the mouth while making a loud “panting” noise. This should be done very slowly at first, and then over time singers should work to increase the speed and duration of the pant. During exhalation the abdomen should go in toward the spine. During inhalation the abdomen should go out away from the spine. As the speed of the pant increases, the size of the abdominal movement should decrease. Maintain good posture, including an expanded rib cage. There should be no movement in the shoulders.

• The Long Hiss

This can increase control over the muscles of exhalation, thereby increasing a singer’s steadiness of tone and ability to sing long phrases. Following a moderately full silent inhalation, each singer exhales for as long as possible using a quiet hissing sound. Keep the shoulders still and relaxed during inhalation and expand around the belly. The exercise should be timed so that the singers can work to increase the amount of time that they are able to sustain the hiss on one exhalation. Make sure that the ribcage does not collapse and that there is no tension in the tongue as air is expelled.

• Sostenuto

In its most developed stage, sostenuto technique allows the singer to sustain long phrases with seeming ease and

security. It relates directly to “the Long Hiss,” and can be further practiced by singing melodies of some length on one breath. Care should be taken to keep the muscles of the throat, mouth, and face relaxed.

• Staccato

This technique relates directly to “the Pant.” Singers begin by adding short bursts of light tone during each exhalation of a slow pant. Continue the same physical approach using single-pitched or stepwise vocalizes sung in the middle range at a slow tempo. The noise associated with the panting inhalation should be eliminated when singing staccato. As facility permits, arpeggiated and other more complex exercises should be used, range should be extended, and tempo increased. The faster singers are able to sing staccato vocalizes, the less need there will be to inhale between each tone and the more subtle the abdominal movement should become. Heavy singing should be avoided in the performance of any staccato vocalise.