

Soloist and chorister: Integration and responsibility

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For many years there has been discussion between groups of voice teachers and choir directors on the perceived beneficial or detrimental effects of choral singing on the developing vocal technique of university-age singers (Decker & Herford, 1973; Glenn, 1991). It is not my expectation that this dialogue might be discontinued because I offer suggestions for integration and responsibility at this symposium. Rather, I offer my thoughts based on my affiliation with two post-secondary institutions known for singing excellence and achievement in both choral and operatic repertoire. My statements are intended to mark a delineation of responsibility and suggestions for productive integration of vocal information among singers, their voice teachers and their choir directors. First, allow me to assert that I believe that participation in ensemble singing is beneficial to the development of musicianship and vocal talent of university-age singers. Exposure to musical style periods and genre are critical aspects of any voice curriculum and I endorse development of both accompanied and a cappella ensembles of various sizes to accommodate the specific musical needs of informed performance practice.

From the first year of vocal instruction at the university level, my focus as a teacher of singing is to help each student become as distinctive a singer as possible by revealing the instrument, musician and artist housed in each voice. Through perceptive choices of repertoire, language and style, and through healthy development of specific technical skills, I aim to exploit the strengths and weaknesses of each student I teach. It is the teacher's responsibility to know what they sing, where they sing, why they sing, how much they sing, and what the vocal demands are before and after each session of prolonged singing. Avoid scheduling lessons immediately after choir rehearsals. Teachers, frequently ask how your student is managing the demands of all repertoire prepared for performance in class, in studio or in choir. Ask the student to bring their choral repertoire to their voice lesson for help with specific passages. Relate technical issues to the same concern in solo repertoire and provide the solution as effectively as one would in an aria or art song. Teach your students how to practice and how to use their singing time wisely. Equally important will be a discussion regarding stamina. Guide your students to recognize the difference between muscular rigidity which is the enemy of good singing (Doscher, 1994), and flexibility and malleability which are the cornerstones of healthy vocal production. Take the initiative to speak to the conductor about your student and their vocal progress, and invite him or her to observe your student's voice lesson. Have you observed your student singing

in choir? Know which part the student is singing, and request changes if you feel that there is a potential problem. Be a role model in attending solo and ensemble performances and be a partner to the choral and opera programs. Your attitude will be mirrored in your students. Encourage the student to be curious about the myriad vocal sounds inherent in his/her voice. Listen to and analyze the actual freedom and release of the singing (Fowler, 1987). Is your teaching providing vocal independence? Know if there is room in your studio and in your student's learning for a variety of vocal influences.

One must never forget that we teach *singers* as well as *singing*. Singers want to and should be noticed for the beauty of their voices. The singer mentality has less to do with chorister/soloist issues than it does with their perception of the desirability of their voices. The large-voiced, voluptuous soprano may be large and voluptuous in both person and personality, but her identity is wrapped around two vocal folds which, though hidden from view, dominate her thoughts, motivation and actions through a good portion of her day. In most cases to hide the voice within a section is to hide the singer herself. However, to identify the distinctively beautiful element of her voice and to exploit it within the ensemble is quite another approach. If a singer perceives that his/her voice is heard as undesirable by musician-mentors in authority, the spirit of giving and act of releasing will be lost. Unless the act of singing involves the act of releasing, compensatory tensions will take over. These tensions are apparent not only in tone and production, but they are also obvious in attitude and body language. A negative perception of choir has been born.

Singers - your responsibility is to discern with the help of your conductor and teacher what vocal strength you contribute most to the ensemble; then deliver it consistently. Allow the conductor to do his/her job; that is, by giving your distinctive voice to the ensemble, you give the ensemble a matchless resource of timbre, weight and vibrancy (Goodwin, 1977). Assume that the conductor wants your tone and knows how it can shape the music best. You do not have the right to dominate, but you do have the right to be heard and to participate within the colour of the ensemble. Invite choral conductors to your solo performances. Know that choir directors need the best musician/singers they can access (Glenn, 1991) - and so do casting directors! Discover what you need to practice and use the two-hour ensemble rehearsal to engage the information and focus of your voice lesson and musicianship classes. Are you aware that the quantity of time spent with your choir director and peers is far greater than the actual time spent with your voice teacher? It is your responsibility to physicalize the information you know about singing whenever possible. Audition for solos.

Regarding vibrato and straight-tone, be informed. It is the regular modulation of tension and release within the laryngeal mechanism which contributes to vibrato in the voice (Vennard, Hirano, and Ohala, 1970); without alternate work and rest coupled with an efficient respiratory system, the phonatory process cannot help but fatigue and compensate with negative behaviours. Discuss the issues of vibrato and straight-tone in your voice lesson. Know that studies exist which reveal that Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau's recording of Schumann's Liederkreis (Large, 1980) shows his artistic predilection for straight-tone to an average of 40% of the recorded cycle. Sylvia McNair's 1999 performances of Cleopatra at the Metropolitan Opera were sung to critical praise in a predominantly non-

vibrato manner. Many esteemed singers make use of straight-tone as an interpretive device. It can be a very effective tool in your artistry kit. Straight tone may become a destructive element in your singing when it is both prolonged and not relieved by the modulating muscular configurations of vibrato.

Be curious about where you sit in formation (Tocheff, 1990) and how you contribute to the vocal timbres around you (Goodwin, 1977). If the formation allows, choose a same-voiced partner, and know when taking "time out" is in your best interest. Audiate with interest and energy; don't be caught looking like a bump on a log! Take responsibility for warming up your body and brain before each rehearsal - the voice will follow. Be a leader in musicianship and attitude, and enjoy the benefit of making music with others. In rehearsal, observe the alignment and vowel formation of your peers. Refine your language skills. Use the choral setting to learn onset of tone, rhythmic impulse of the breath (Ehmann & Haasemann, 1981), dynamic contrast and timbral changes of tone, phrasing, chamber music techniques, and resonant and precise intonation. Developing your ear does not mean to hear oneself better in an ensemble, but rather to learn to acknowledge aurally the harmonic structure of which you are an important part (Goodwin, 1977). This skill will help you in your singing with orchestra, chamber music and in opera. If you suffer performance anxiety, use your experiences within the group to take the vocal and performance risks which you fear in the solo setting (David, 1995). Should you disregard the technical benefit of your choral experience, you underestimate a valuable aspect of your university vocal training. Beyond its musical and social value, choral singing is a valuable means of measuring your basic technical facility and musical maturity. From knowing one's voice thoroughly, confident decisions can be made about solo repertoire, roles, appropriate curriculum choices, and future solo and choral commitments.

The voice teacher and choral conductor share a most important premise; that is, even if it were possible, we do not have the right to try to "change" a voice. Rather, we are charged to communicate accurate information precisely and to contribute to the artistic and intellectual development of young singers (Sataloff, 1991). Through various means of modelling, gesture, rote, fact, imagery, performance, and sometimes, hysteria, we make a powerful impact on the lives of our students. Choir directors, study the process of singing and the physiology of the vocal instrument. Be a vocal role model to your ensemble through the use of your voice in both speaking and singing. Be aware that the choir before you is a reflection of your body language, and that the sound which you evoke is a reflection of your musical gesture and aesthetic (Fowler, 1987). Welcome the intensity and core in each voice in your choir and demand that it be present in the tonal structure of the ensemble. Know that every singer within the ensemble is a work in progress, and expect vocal fatigue. Vocal rest is seldom a luxury for singers - it is often a necessity. Respect the preventative measures taken by singers and their teachers when a student is coping with changes in their singing process. In female singers, be aware of the influence of fluctuating hormones, premenstrual edema and increased risk of submucosal hemorrhage (Sataloff, 1991). Take the time to get to know the stamina and progress of your choir members. Although this is easier in small or moderate-sized ensembles, in large ensembles adapt the practice of calling on quartets or octets in rehearsal so that the voices become a real entity

to you. In addition to warm-ups, warm down the voices at the end of the rehearsal through the use of simple mid-range vocalises or phrases. Similar to orchestra and opera rehearsal space, insist on an acoustical and physical placement which allows singers sufficient room to move, release and sing.

Voice teachers and choir directors must develop a language of instruction which is pedagogically secure; for example, dropping the jaw does increase oral resonance and contributes to enhanced resonance, especially at higher frequencies (Sundberg, 1987). However, many student-singers misinterpret the concept and hyperextend the lower jaw rather than allow the joint to rotate freely. This hyperextension creates tension and closure both laryngeally and at the temporomandibular joint. Fatigue and compression (Sataloff, 1991) are the result of this otherwise positive instruction to "drop the jaw". Another case of unclear instruction involves the inhalation process. There is a strong tendency on the part of voice teachers, conductors, and accompanists to exaggerate the inhalation process for students by means of noisy, gasp-like breaths. This overloading and pressurization of the inhalation contributes to a misunderstanding between quantity of breath and the quality of a replenishing cycle of breath (Vennard, 1967). Less is more! Freedom in the process of inhalation will mirror freedom in the exhalation which is the singing itself. The breath must be welcomed into the body.

Take the time to consult with voice teachers regarding voice placement and registration; for example, make careful decisions regarding the tessitura of the tenor part. This voice type requires special care in coordinating the aerodynamic and myoelastic function of the singing process (Doscher, 1994), especially through the *passaggi*. Some teachers will advocate the choral use of falsetto in young tenors, while others may not. Loss of acuity in both pitch and vibrato rate will reveal fatigue and stamina issues particularly in young tenors and high sopranos. In young baritone and mezzo voices, watch that "warmth" is not the result of a retracted tongue and depressed laryngeal mechanism. Roundness of tone can be achieved with "lips forward", but notice that the jaw is not forward, nor the soft palate dropped.

Finally, we must remember that singers cannot "put their tone" anywhere. We can access the formation of vowels and the articulation of consonant groups, and we have some control over the release of breath and the shaping of the vocal tract. From these finely coordinated actions, our confirmation of placement, resonance, legato, good diction and breath management are beneficial by-products. The by-products are what we hear and feel, but they are not what we do. To give voice to what we can do is to give instruction precisely and to empower us to sing freely. The distinct beauty of one's voice is then revealed.

In the final analysis, the responsibilities of singer, voice teacher and choir or opera conductor are inextricably intertwined in the vocal education of university-age singers. That we share the pursuit of beauty through the mystery of the human voice numbers us among the most privileged of musicians. Each of us is skilled in our craft and passionate in our art. Should we exercise our right to learn from each other and to integrate our collective experiences and expertise, we might achieve a most harmonious vocal "blend" and ensure a comprehensive and mutually rewarding study of singing in our university programs.

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