

The Power of Song in Collegiate Music Curricula

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Abstract

This paper emphasizes that singing can be integrated throughout collegiate music curricula to enrich vocal students' education. Typically, undergraduate voice majors study privately, sing in ensembles, and participate in opera workshop or productions, especially if they are performance majors. Graduate curricula frequently couple opera studies and private lessons, and may include an ensemble requirement. Yet it is not uncommon to hear arguments that the choral ensemble is not a necessary component of students' education, especially at the graduate level. Nevertheless, many of these singers will eventually earn part of their living as section leaders in ensembles or part of an opera or musical theatre company chorus.

The author argues that education balancing all three aspects of singing provides the most comprehensive experience for developing artistically competent singers. What students learn about technique and expression in the voice studio directly connects to their choral experience, where emphasis on reading and aural skills, among other things, enhances personal musicianship. Through opera study, the student learns to bring drama and depth to musical presentation through performing a role. Transmitting that understanding both to solo and ensemble settings can enrich both.

The paper outlines in detail how the areas of study overlap and how the benefits of each, in combination, can mitigate concerns about solo singing vs. ensemble singing, for example, or about over-taxing singers. A tri-part vocal education, even at the graduate level, provides untold opportunities for unleashing the power of song. The paper also gives suggestions for integrating study, including ideas for sample programming.

Introduction

Collegiate music curricula for undergraduate vocal music majors traditionally require that students participate in choral ensembles as well as taking individual voice lessons, typically throughout the entire undergraduate experience and often at least early in the graduate school experience. Regrettably, conflicts between choral and voice faculty sometimes arise. Some voice teachers may not want their students singing in choirs for fear of their having to sacrifice their vocal development as soloists; some students try to avoid choir because they think it will harm their voices and be counterproductive to their technique. Some choral conductors expect singers to minimize or eliminate vibrato so they do not "stick out" in the group, thereby feeding the notion that choral singing may be controversial for the so-called "solo" singer.

The following titles hint at such issues:

Solo Singing Technique and Choral Singing Technique in Undergraduate Vocal Performance Majors: A Pedagogical Discussion. (Detwiler, 2008)

Building Bridges Among Choral Conductors, Voice Teachers and Students. (Apfelstadt, Robinson and Taylor, 2003)

Perspectives on Choral and Solo Singing: Enhancing Communication between Choral Conductors and Voice Teachers. (Ferrell, 2010)

Vibrato vs. Nonvibrato: the Solo Singer in the Collegiate Choral Ensemble. (Olson, 2008)

Vibrato or Nonvibrato in Solo and Choral Singing: Is there Room for Both? (Sublett, 2009)

Vibrato, Science, and the Choral Singer. (Walker, 2006)

Add the element of opera study, which is frequently required for vocal performance majors, even at the undergraduate level, and the challenges increase. Students seeking a solo career frequently aspire to careers in opera or perhaps in musical theatre and see themselves as potential soloists, not chorus or company members. Sometimes all of these elements of the student's education (voice lessons, choral ensemble experience, and opera or musical theatre workshops) seem to be at cross purposes, rather than functioning in a complementary way. Conflicts among students, voice teachers and choral conductors can result.

The effects of such conflicts are difficult to hide, can be painful to endure, and are counterproductive to a comprehensive vocal education. The concept of "solo" vs. "choral" singing relates to the notion that one sings differently as a soloist than one does in an ensemble.

Areas of potential conflict

There are four areas in which potential conflicts may exist for the individual singer in the ensemble setting:

1. Timbre

Gwendolyn Detwiler (2010) clarifies the primary difference between solo singing and ensemble singing in her dissertation, *Solo Singing Technique and Choral Singing Technique in Undergraduate Vocal Performance Majors: A Pedagogical Discussion*. The essential difference between what Detwiler calls "solo mode" and "chorus mode" (Detwiler, p.24) is timbre. She attributes that difference in timbre to the singer's format, a "resonance peak" that is essential to classical singing as it allows for projection. She points out that undergraduate voice majors enter university as untrained singers, in whom the singer's formant is not yet developed. If the choral conductor asks for a sound that is essentially untrained (i.e. without much evidence of a singer's formant), most first and second year students can produce this sound with no difficulty. At this point, choir can be a good place for them to develop their technique as it gives them additional vocal time beyond their lessons and practice time. As they mature and develop their solo qualities, however, they no longer easily produce the same kind of even, "blendable" sound that the choral conductor wants. In other words, as the voice students move from "untrained" to "trained" category, they begin to experience difficulties in choral ensembles and may feel they are having to sacrifice their resonance and colour in order to "blend."

In an article I wrote with a voice faculty colleague and a graduate student in vocal pedagogy and conducting, we suggested that the singer does not have to eliminate this formant in order to sing effectively in an ensemble (Apfelstadt, Robinson & Taylor, 2003). This corroborates what Brian Carter (2007) found in his dissertation, *An Acoustic Comparison*

of Voice Use in Solo and Choir Singing in Undergraduate and Graduate Student Singers. Working with bass-baritones at three different levels of music education (first/second year undergraduate; third – fifth year undergraduate; graduate level), Carter recorded the singers in varying contexts, and noted that only the most mature group, the graduate students, used “the singer’s formant without fail in both choral and solo situations” (cited in Detwiler, 2010, p. 57). “The older singer is keenly aware that he must have a strong SF (singer’s formant) in order to sing in the most efficient way possible, and very rarely diminishes it.” (Carter, p. 45)

2. Vowel formation

Related to tone colour is the shape of the vowel. Vowel modification is a topic of great relevance to both the voice teacher and the choral conductor. Berton Coffin, a known vocal pedagogue, developed with acoustician Pierre Delattre, “a practical method for finding which vowels will have a compatible frequency with a specific timbre. The Chromatic Vowel Chart, which uses acoustic phonetics, represents a body of knowledge that can be an effective tool in the voice studio and in the choral rehearsal to achieve an efficient tone through optimum resonance.” (Apfelstadt et al, 2003, p. 27). The article goes into detail about the method’s use in the choral rehearsal to accommodate individual singers’ needs to modify vowels for optimum efficiency.

3. Vibrato

Another often-controversial issue in this solo vs. choral debate is vibrato. The more classical training the voice student receives, the more the vibrato develops. Vibrato is an expressive element of good singing. Excess vibrato, however, can affect the evenness of sound in a choral ensemble, as can conflicting vibrato speeds. As a conductor, I sometimes ask singers to sing with a “simpler” sound (that results in narrowing their vibrato amplitude), but I never ask for “straight tone,” having observed that this often causes tension among singers and gives fuel to the controversy about singing in choir. Singers fear that using minimal or no vibrato for prolonged periods will cause vocal strain, and indeed it can. Voice teachers, trying to teach their students to develop free and healthy singing with a resonant tone, are concerned that singers will experience vocal fatigue by singing in choirs where this kind of minimal vibrato tone is the norm.

These three areas of debate – timbre; vowel formation and modification (and attendant issues regarding consonant pronunciation as well); and vibrato – are more than enough to support the notion that there are conflicts about solo singing vs. choral singing. There is another element, however, that plays a role in this controversy and it is a psychological one.

4. Mindset

Singing in an ensemble requires a different kind of listening than singing solo material. Karen Brunssen, who was coordinator of voice and opera studies at Northwestern University in Chicago, asks “How will they learn to listen to other voices if they only ever sing with a piano? In choir, if you’re an alto in the front row, you can hear the basses behind you. It starts that listening, which you need when you’re a soloist with a symphony orchestra behind you.” (cited in Waleson, 2003, p.14) A soloist needs to coordinate with the accompaniment but does not need to worry about matching vowels, for example, whereas an ensemble singer must be conscious of matching vowels with those around him or her, and must listen carefully in order to be consistent with the ensemble’s rhythm and pitch. Listening to other singers in close

proximity is a different skill than simply listening to oneself. Furthermore, there is a psychological difference between submitting to the will of the conductor and being fully in charge of the sound and musical outcomes in solo singing.

Conceptual emphases in each area of the vocal curriculum

Despite debate, collegiate music education has historically included solo and ensemble experience. For the purposes of this paper, and given the fact that many vocal performance majors seem to aspire to careers in opera (or in some cases, musical theatre), I propose a curriculum that involves individual voice lessons, choral ensemble, and opera study. Each area is ripe with potential benefits for vocal students. Following is a list of educational concepts that are emphasized in the voice studio, in opera (or musical theatre) workshop, and in choral ensembles.

1. Voice studio

Technique – breathing; resonance; vibrato

Repertoire – solo (albeit often operatic, sometimes musical theatre) material.

(Note that the National Association of Teachers of Singing rule is that first year students in voice should not sing arias in competition.)

Languages – as many as required by the prescribed repertoire (typically, English and Italian; German, French)

Diction – formation of vowels; clarity of consonants; expression

Style -- variety of styles (although it may be mostly Romantic and later periods)

Performance skills – expressive communication in recital setting

2. Opera workshop or musical theatre

Technique (Building on solo/lesson technique: how does one project, for example, with an orchestra or instrumental ensemble?)

Repertoire – operatic or theatrical

Languages – as required by repertoire

Diction – accuracy and clarity for projection; expression

Style -- depends on the genre (standard opera repertoire? Or musical theatre?)

Performance skills – expressive communication enhanced by body movement, facial expression and movement

3. Choral ensemble

Ensemble technique: accuracy of pitch and rhythm, uniformity of attacks and releases

Vocal technique: healthy breath management as a foundation

Repertoire – choral (usually a wide variety of styles although some navigate toward mostly contemporary music that requires a very even tone)

Languages – as many as required by the prescribed repertoire

Diction – formation of vowels; clarity of consonants; expression

Style -- variety of musical styles (Renaissance through contemporary)

Performance skills – expressive communication in the ensemble setting

Aural skills -- intervals; listening for tuning

Reading -- literacy, perhaps through solfege or a system of reading music

Clearly, there is commonality amongst all three areas with various elements overlapping. For example:

Technique -- Vocal skills include such things as controlling volume. The solo singer (whether in recital or in a staged performance) needs to have a range of dynamics at his/her disposal, just as for choral singing. Indeed, choral singing may actually enhance the singers' control. William Weinert, Director of Choral Activities at the Eastman School of Music, says "We try to use choral singing to make them better singers – to give them better control over their voices. Choral singing works on pitch, control, and rhythm. It's the basic things like block and tackle." (Cited in Waleson, 2003, p. 14). The solo singer needs to tune with himself or herself, as well as with the accompaniment. Emphasis on listening in an ensemble can make the singer more discriminating. When recording individual voice lessons for later evaluation, students should assess not only for their accuracy, agility, and diction, for example, but also for the fundamental tone itself.

Languages – Choirs that sing in various languages allow the solo singer to reinforce what is taught in the studio lesson and on stage. The better the individual's language skills, the greater the contribution he or she can make to the ensemble.

Style – The kind of solo singing one does in Baroque music can be very helpful in ensemble music of the same period. For example, consider articulation in this style period and the need to sing with detached articulation. While legato singing "is a fundamental principle of beautiful and healthy singing," (Emmons and Chase, 2006, p. 31), and transfers readily to a vast amount of choral repertoire, other articulations are required, both for solo and choral repertoire, particularly for Baroque, Classical and some contemporary material.

Diction – Good diction skills encompass clarity as well as sensitive expression of text meaning. Vowel formation is fundamental to good tone; good tone allows for projection on stage. Further, good tone of individual singers can only enhance the choral tone. Donald Neuen (2002, p. 11) says "great soloists can make great choral singers." Solo singers study text carefully; they are very aware of context, and of how a role reveals the character, for example. That can transfer to the choral ensemble when an imaginative conductor encourages singers to study the poetry and the context of the music. Why sing only words when we can truly tell a story? All music, whether for soloists or ensembles, is telling a story of some sort.

Style – What is or is not appropriate to various styles is a key concept in performance. The style of a Mozart aria compared to one by Wagner, for example, dictates difference in sound. When a choir sings Bach, it should sound different from when singing music by Brahms or Whitacre. Some choirs sing with the same tone no matter what the repertoire or style; that seems to defeat the notion of style, rather than enhance it. Likewise, singing music of varied styles, whether in an ensemble, on the stage, or in an ensemble, should enhance all of one's other performance settings.

Performance skills – Solo singers must communicate text meaning. Likewise, choral singers communicate text. Opera singers communicate the same, in the character of the person they are representing. Faces, tone colour, body movement are all engaged to accomplish this goal. Choirs can express facially the meaning of music without overdoing it and often, a mere reminder of

how one would do that in the solo setting is very helpful to ensemble singers who may think it is less important in a collective setting.

Unique choral contributions

According to the list of acquired skills, there are two areas that appear to be uniquely choral, those of aural skills and reading or literacy skills. In fact, these do and should relate to all areas of the vocal curriculum as it takes those abilities to learn music, whether for solo singing, an operatic role, or ensemble parts. It is in the ensemble, however, where those skills are frequently the greatest priority. The studio teacher focuses on technique and solo repertoire; the opera coach is concerned with the person's learning a role and being able to project it on stage; in the choral ensemble, the conductor can incorporate aural skills and reading into every single rehearsal, constantly developing those skills that can transfer to the other settings when the singer is learning music. Furthermore, as a kind of laboratory for future teachers, the choral ensemble should provide this experience. Although not all vocal performance majors aspire to teach ensembles, they will most likely teach individuals at some point, as well as serve as section leaders in other ensembles, and the opportunity to see and experience how aural and reading skills can be developed will serve them well both at present and in the future.

The choral ensemble experience should develop aural skills and literacy in a very focused manner, thus helping both the studio voice and the opera context. Being self-discriminating and skilled at reading so one can learn music more quickly will enable singers to compete with their peers, indeed to stand out from them when it comes to auditions. Singers who are literate may get the nod over others when it comes to learning roles rapidly for fill-in or substitute situations. Getting a reputation for that ability to be a quick study is a good one to maintain.

As conductors, one of our greatest contributions is to develop musicianship skills in singers participating in choir. Our options include these:

1. *Make warm-ups especially effective by including vocal skills, aural skills/listening, and reading skills, and integrating these throughout the rehearsal.* Rather than using the same vocal exercises every rehearsal, select those that relate most directly to the repertoire for the day; extract motives to use as warm-ups. Prepare for rhythmic challenges by dictating the patterns as part of the breath activation phase of the warm-up (e.g. hissing on sh, p, t, k, etc.). Introduce melodic material through reading from the board before handing out scores. Sing all forms of major and minor and chromatic scales. Use solfege. Listen intently when students are singing
vocal patterns: for example, are they producing a good tone, with adequate breath energy? Are they singing in tune? If not, what can be done to improve? Giving immediate feedback during warm-ups is essential to improving singers' skills.
2. *Guide students to make transfers.* It is vital to draw attention to the commonalities we share amongst studio voice experience, opera or musical theatre workshops, and the choral ensemble. I used to resent having to justify to resistant singers what I do for a living; now I consider it an opportunity. Transfer is not automatic; if we do not make those connections obvious, singers do not necessarily see them for themselves. They may continue to abide by and to promote misconceptions.

3. *Program creatively to incorporate all elements of vocal education in one concert setting.*

Select works that require soloists as well as incorporating solo segments into programs. The fall 2010 concert program for MacMillan Singers at the University of Toronto, entitled “Choral Gems throughout the Ages,” comprised multiple ensemble pieces, as well as Mozart’s *Regina Coeli*, featuring a solo quartet, and a segment of solo performances featuring opera arias and art songs. The voice faculty and I consulted about the choice of soloists, based on fall auditions. Many audience members commented afterwards how much they enjoyed the variety of music and the opportunity to hear so many individual singers. In the spring of 2011, the same ensemble performed Whitacre’s *Five Hebrew Love Songs* and Brahms’ *Liebeslieder Waltzes*, Op. 52. Although the Whitacre work calls for only one soloist, the Brahms allows for considerably more individualizing. We sang six movements with the entire ensemble and the rest we performed as solos, duets, quartets or small ensembles up to a dozen singers. In addition, five singers who were piano majors successfully auditioned to play the lower parts of the piano accompaniment with our professional accompanist playing the primo parts throughout. In this way, we involved many of the ensemble members in multiple contexts, and again, provided variety in timbre and texture for the audience.

Summary

Further suggestions for linking all parts of a tri-part comprehensive vocal education (studio lessons, ensemble, opera) include constant communication amongst all faculty members working with the students. At the University of Toronto, we sit as a group to audition singers in the fall for ensembles, including opera, and for various solo opportunities available during the year. Voice teachers, opera coaches and conductors participate on the audition panel. We decide where the students fit best into the ensembles, and what voice parts are most appropriate.

Planning musical events that link curricular areas is another way of collaborating to benefit students. “A Night at the Opera” would be an excellent venue for showcasing singers in a variety of contexts: solo, staged excerpts, and ensembles. Conferring with voice teachers when assigning soloists for major works and opera roles is a good way of ensuring that the voice teachers have vested interest in the productions and assist in the preparation.

Open rehearsals of ensembles and opera workshop classes enable voice faculty to observe their students in other contexts; likewise, inviting a voice teacher to coach in either setting can be helpful to conductors and opera coaches as they see solo vocal pedagogy in action. Consulting with voice teachers about vocal challenges that arise in the choral rehearsal is a way of collaborating to students’ benefit. It is imperative that choral conductors acquire a good knowledge of vocal pedagogy so as to support healthy singing. Although many conductors were themselves voice majors and may continue to sing professionally, they may not have studied vocal pedagogy formally, and conductors coming from a keyboard background are even less likely to have done so.

Collaboration among colleagues, clearly modeled for their students, is a powerful way of changing negative attitudes and misconceptions about singing in ensembles. Given all the lessons we can learn from each of the three areas, it is evident that integrating the curriculum with emphasis on all three elements of vocal study is bound to benefit vocal students by giving them a stronger educational framework that, in turn, will prepare them professionally for a variety of options.

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