



Unlocking Our Singers' Potential

Challenge 6: Teaching beautiful singing

By Jonathan Laabs

It is easy for adult singers to feel as though their time for vocal growth is over. Besides singing from the pew on Sunday, singing along with a favorite song on the radio or the occasional serenade in the shower, many adults do not have an outlet to use and develop their gifts in singing. Opportunities abound for younger singers to be a part of choirs in school and various community organizations. As the young voice matures, progress and growth are very apparent, and much of this progress can be credited to daily instruction and reinforcement. Once these education experiences are past, time has a way of hazing things over, and bad habits begin to creep into our singing. It's no wonder that a church choir director might feel overwhelmed when working with his or her singers.

However, it might be comforting for directors to consider their adult singers very similar to teenage and college singers in a few simple but key ways: 1) All singers come to choir to make beautiful sounds. In other words, even adult singers want to improve their ability as a singer. All directors should feel empowered to look beyond notes and rhythms and devote time to improving a choir's fundamental singing sound. 2) All singers are almost always making the best sound they know how to make. If this is true, then knowledge is power. If a director invests time in teaching and practicing the fundamentals of healthy choral singing, the singers will be better equipped to use these techniques in all aspects of singing.

Making the shift to the singing voice

One of the first steps to improving a singer's sound is understanding the basic differences between the speaking voice and singing voice. When we use our speaking voice on a daily basis, we are using only a fraction of the total span of our voice. As a rehearsal begins, a choral director is dealing with singers who have spent most of a day grinding, pressing, and often over-using small sections of the voice in the middle to lower register. Yes, the various muscles used to speak might be "warmed up," but the voice certainly is

not prepared for the act of singing. A director's first objective in each rehearsal should be to assist the singers in making that delicate transition between the speaking voice and the singing voice. This process should take place primarily in the warm-up, but can be continually reinforced during the entire rehearsal.

Teaching the singing process

Breath

The singing process begins with breath. In daily activity, breathing is a passive process which takes little to no thought. When we do think about breathing (for example, during exercise), we often settle for very shallow breaths centered in the chest. This is a bad habit that people develop during the course of life. (Ask an adult to take in a deep breath to see him or her puff out the chest, suck in the stomach, and tense up many muscles in the body). Needless to say, this is not an ideal start for a relaxed choral sound. Breathing for singing is better explained as a relaxation and expansion process. The expansion happens low at the belt line and in all directions, and the relaxation should happen in the throat. Singers want to avoid loud, "gasp" breaths, which cause tension in the sound. A helpful idea can be to give the singers a short checklist as they practice a good breath: Is my breath silent? Am I expanding low in the abdominal muscles? Are my shoulders and chest relaxed?

This breathing process can be taught in various ways during the warm-up. Ask the singers to follow this simple pattern: at

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*This issue is especially valuable
for church choir directors.
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the direction of the conductor, breathe in (silently, of course) for 4 beats, suspend the breath for 4 beats, exhale on an audible “sh” for 4 beats, breathe in for 5 beats, suspend for 5 beats, exhale on “sh” for 5 beats, inhale for 6, etc. This cycle can be repeated as the director prefers, but a good starting point is 4 up to 7. There are a number of key points to constantly reinforce:

- The inhalation should always be silent, and the singers should use the entire time to breathe in. This works against the idea of breathing one beat before an entrance. If you have a longer time to breathe, use a longer breath.
- The idea of suspending the breath will most likely be foreign to singers as well. This is not holding your breath, which simply involves closing your throat. Instead, try to keep the throat open as the air floats in the body, waiting to be exhaled. This allows the throat muscles to remain relaxed.
- Finally, the “sh” sound used in the exhalation should be intense, but regulated by the abdominal muscles, not the throat muscles. Invite the singers to completely use all the air that was drawn in within the allotted time.

The lip buzz

Once the breath is working well, the singing can be well-supported, allowing for a free and relaxed sound. I begin the singing process at every rehearsal with an exercise called the lip buzz. The singer blows air through the lips, causing them to vibrate (similar to a child’s horse impression) while simultaneously producing a voiced pitch. If a singer has trouble getting the lips to continually vibrate, first encourage him or her to keep a faster, steadier airflow going through the lips. Furthermore, if a singer legitimately has trouble keeping his or her lips relaxed enough, try having the singer put a small amount of pressure on both cheeks, letting the lips pucker together slightly. Understand that it is not uncommon for singers to have trouble with lip buzzing at first. However, it is a process that can be developed and improved. It may seem childish or foolish at first, especially to adult singers, but the effectiveness of this exercise to teach healthy production has been proven time and time again. Once the action is taught, it can be used in numerous forms and exercises during warm-ups and rehearsals.

Devote at least ten minutes in each rehearsal to warming up.

I am a strong proponent of using the lip buzz throughout the entire rehearsal to reinforce correct sound placement and register shifts. Have the choir lip buzz a difficult passage and memorize the feeling, then switch to only vowel sounds while maintaining the same sensations, and finally apply those sensations to the full text. This same concept can be used to tune most chords. Start by lip buzzing the chord and finding the correct place for the sound, then open to the vowel sound. The possibilities for any of these techniques are endless.



The troublesome *passaggios*

One new concept for inexperienced singers is understanding that our voices are divided into several different registers, similar to the gears in the transmission of a car. The common problem exists at the shift points, also called *passaggios*. While there are numerous shifting places in the voice, the major shift happens between the two main registers, often called *chest voice* and *head voice*. The chest voice is where most of our speaking takes place. It is lower, heavier, and very weighty. On the other hand, the head voice is much higher, lighter, and more airy. If someone were to imitate the voice of Mickey Mouse, they would most likely float up into the head voice. It is much easier for a singer to sing loudly and fully in the chest voice, but it often pulls the sound flat. Many singers will avoid using the head voice at all because it can be characterized as a “weak” sound. The average singer can usually speak or sing in both voices separately, but constantly changing between the two is a challenge.

A director can use the warm-up time to help singers negotiate between these two voices and improve the ability to use them as one. Have the singers lip buzz while sliding *slowly* between octaves. Encourage them to use an upper octave sound that is just as relaxed as the lower, allowing the voice to shift naturally to the upper register. Emphasize that this is done with the breath, not by manipulating the voice. This process is greatly aided by the use of the lip buzz, which helps the voice follow the correct path through the shifts. Once the sensation is felt by the singers, try sliding up and down once on the lip buzz and then opening to the vowel “ee.” Encourage the singers to follow the same vocal path with the vowel as they did with the lip buzz. The final step involves moving from the “ee” vowel to “ah.” This vowel will want to fall back in the throat, but should be kept forward. Tell the singers to “sing the ‘ah’ in the ‘ee’ place.”

It is also beneficial to use exercises which encourage singers to carry their upper singing registers down into the lower registers. Have the singers start on the C above middle C and lip buzz down a five-tone scale (so, fa, mi, re, do; 5, 4, 3, 2, 1; etc.). Start with a lighter, supported sound on the upper C, and ask the singers to carry this same sound all the way down through the vocal shifts. Move the exercise up or down by half steps to address the different vocal shifts. Follow the same progression of vowels, opening to “ee” and then to “ah” or any of the five

major vowels (ee, ay, ah, oh, oo). If at any time the sound becomes heavy or flat, return immediately to the lip buzz and reestablish the fundamental sound. Descending through the *passaggios* is always easier for singers, so directors should also experiment with ascending exercises, which carry the singers up through their register shifts.

Unison singing can be one of the greatest challenges.

Creating a unified sound

Another challenge is creating a unified sound throughout the choir. When a singer enters into a setting with 10 to 20 other singers, issues involving diction and vowel formation can easily become apparent. Unison singing can be one of the greatest challenges for a choir, exposing anything that is not unified.

This process can also be addressed and practiced during a warm-up period. Exercises for vowel unification can be very simple. Take a unison pitch in the middle of the voice and have the choir sing “mee, may, mah, moh, moo,” with the director cueing every vowel change. Take the time to allow each vowel to settle and encourage the singers to listen and match vowel colors with those around them. If the director emphasizes the importance of unified vowel color, singers learn how to become actively in charge of diction. If a single pitch becomes easy for the choir, have them do the same exercise using a 3- or 4-part chord. A director need not think that every warm-up used must be cutting edge or clever. Sometimes the simplest exercise is also the most effective.



When teaching and demonstrating vowels for the choir, it is often helpful to use kinesthetic motions to help reinforce these concepts. This may seem like a juvenile thing to include with adult singers, but any singer who experiences firsthand the difference it can make in a choir’s sound will be instantly convinced. Suggestions include the following:

- Pulling a thread from the lips while singing “oo” to encourage singers to pucker the lips
- Tracing a circular shape around the lips while singing “oh” to encourage singers to wrap their lips around the vowel

- Touching the forehead while singing “ay” to encourage the singers to keep that vowel placed forward in the “mask” of the face
- Placing a vertical hand in front of the mouth while singing “ee” to encourage singers to not let the vowel spread too far sideways
- Placing a cupped hand next to the cheek while singing “ah” to encourage space in the sound

Directors should feel free to experiment with creating their own motions to use. Remember that singing is meant to be a total body experience.

It doesn’t stop with the warm-up

The warm-up period is a small fraction of the total rehearsal time, especially when choirs are asked to prepare several selections for a service. It is suggested that a director devote at least ten minutes in each rehearsal to warming up. This is not always the easiest investment to make, and it often involves a change in philosophy for directors. We might debate whether we are using our time to improve music or improve singers. It is my suggestion that these two sides of the coin should not be separated. The principles of good choral singing can start in the warm-up and then be used throughout the entire rehearsal. Many times rehearsals become monotonous as the director introduces new repertoire and “pounds notes” for the choir. This is a perfect time to return to conversations about good sound. If a choir initially learns to sing a selection with a good sound instead of learning the notes and trying to adjust sound later, they are much more likely to retain the desired result. While it may mean slowing down the initial process of working through a piece or simplifying repertoire choices, the long-term benefits for the singers and sound of the choir are well worth the investment.

In the same way, the warm-up period need not be completely void of concepts from the repertoire. If the choir is struggling to tune a particular chord in the music, this might be the chord the director chooses to use to practice unifying vowel sounds during the warm-up. If the choir is struggling to sing a particular line in tune, make a short exercise out of the line and move it chromatically up and down during the warm-up. If breath is a problem, sing the line on a single vowel (“ah” or “ee”) to learn the sensation of connecting the whole phrase. If the choir is struggling to unify vowels in a longer phrase, try having them “vowel sing”; sing the entire phrase without any consonant sounds. This will quickly point out to their ears which sections are working and which sections need work.

Their only voice teacher

Wouldn’t it be wonderful to conduct a choir of singers with trained voices? The possibilities for repertoire and performance would be endless, and the singers would sing with a beautiful, resonant, rich sound. The reality is that the closest most singers in

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your choir will ever get to a voice lesson is your rehearsal. While this fact might create a significant amount of pressure, it also provides a wonderful opportunity for all choir directors. Why not allow your choir to attend voice lessons vicariously through you?

The best way to provide sound vocal training for your choir is to take lessons yourself! I cannot count the number of times I have attended my weekly voice lesson and, the very next day, used a concept directly from that lesson with my choir. Private lessons allow directors not only to learn about the singing process in theory, but more importantly, to experience the sensations for themselves. The ability to relate to the singers and sympathize with their vocal struggles not only improves the music making between director and choir, but also enriches the personal relationship between the two.

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A great place to begin looking for a voice teacher is at any local university with an established music program. Adjunct teachers also often have a private studio outside of the university. Well-established community choruses or semi-professional choruses in the area will also have teachers associated with them. If you work with an experienced, knowledgeable teacher, expect to pay \$20–\$30 for a half hour lesson or \$40–\$50 for a full hour lesson. When you're done with this article, hand it back to your pastor and talk to him about making this part of the congregation's budget. This may seem like a substantial commitment, but your choirs will benefit from the experience as much as you do.

The endless cycle

It is easy for any teacher, director, or singer to become overwhelmed by the daunting task of developing and coaching the singing voice. The more we learn about the anatomy of the voice, the process of healthy singing, and all the ways to carry it into a rehearsal, the more we may feel inadequate or ill-prepared to stand in front of our choirs. This learning journey never ends. Directors often learn as much from their singers as they teach them. Everyone experiences these processes differently, and it is never too late to begin learning more about the voice. All singers, from a first grade student to a senior member of the choir can improve the way they use their instrument. Herein lies one of the greatest joys of making music: the cycle of learning, developing, and putting into practice truly is endless.



Online resources

Do you have questions about this or previous articles in this choir series? Go to <https://connect.wels.net/discusschoir>. A Connect account is necessary to post a question. Sign up at <https://connect.wels.net/signup>.