

CHORAL PRIORITIES: WHAT REALLY MATTERS:

by Judy Bowers



FOR PROFESSIONAL choral musicians, the good news is that every year we increase professional knowledge of how to best teach and conduct our choirs. This is also the bad news, however, as it requires a time investment to learn about and possibly implement new methods and materials. Often new knowledge is gleaned from the music education research community, or highly successful practitioners, or composers and publishers who provide new music options, or graduate study, etc. The question then becomes: How can we best disseminate new information so that teacher/conductors can make informed decisions and perhaps prioritize what is most important? Complicating the process of defining priorities is that they may very well differ among schools, dependent on variables which impact student learning and success: student population demographics, school size and infrastructure, administrative and parental support, available funding, etc. The purpose of this paper is to provide some suggestions for prioritizing those things that have strong impact on teacher and student success in middle and high school programs that include developmental groups, those just learning to become choral performers.

MUSIC PEDAGOGICAL KNOWLEDGE/CONTENT

Research activity among choral scholars has lagged behind other musical and peda-

gogical research for several decades; however, within the last 15-20 years, choral research activity has greatly increased. Information on a wide array of choral topics is readily available electronically, reflecting a breadth and depth of study. As young teachers prepare for careers in choral music and pedagogy, they likely enter knowing the professional current “best practice” gleaned from their university curricula. Such topics as teacher effectiveness, strategies for establishing instructional pace in rehearsal (a great deterrent for classroom management problems), vocal pedagogy methods that contribute to healthy vocal training, programs that develop students (such as leadership development), specialized training to embed critical thinking instruction into rehearsals, teacher leadership development that supports professional participation, creating competence in teaching students to perform expressively, new methods for attaching musical learning to performance activity (concepts, skills, etc.), as well as and many other important topics.

Teachers not recently graduated may lack some of this training, and could be at a disadvantage when functioning within a school environment built around current knowledge and practice. Thus, it seems important to provide opportunities for professional growth, perhaps even above and beyond typical district in-service programs. Staying current in any field is a lifelong challenge, and teaching choral music is no exception. It is not enough to acknowledge that new information exists just because it is found in scholarly music re-

search journals that all can access. It is unrealistic, however, to assume that music teachers will independently find this needed information---let’s not forget that dragging home after a long teaching day probably does not lead to reading music research journals until 2:00 am. If true dissemination is desired, then some method of delivering knowledge and training to teacher/conductors is required beyond just suggesting particular journals to read.

The phrase “Don’t try this at home”, often used in television commercials involving some daring deed, suggests that a specific, controlled environment is required for safely accomplishing said task. In the case of choral teachers remaining fresh via learning new teaching knowledge and practices, I believe similarity exists: there must be a safe, nurturing environment to successfully acquire new pedagogy. Perhaps a “translator” to connect research findings with busy teachers might support success. Such things as earning a graduate degree, taking a single graduate class or summer workshop, attending professional conferences with carefully targeted sessions aimed at new information, or any other opportunity that provides a specialist to inform, encourage, and perhaps inspire is likely a helpful choice. This means money, if a school district is not supporting the event, but it is money well spent. Consider it an investment in yourself, and we are all worth it.

The following text offers guidance for (1) choosing repertoire that enhances the probable success of singers who are novice, or who just lack experience, training, or exceptional ability, and (2) creating a possible strategy for empowering novice choral students to sing expressively.

REPERTOIRE SELECTION (BOWERS, 2008)

Structuring successful learning environments has been a prominent topic in for several decades, and Madsen & Kuhn (1994) have long recommended an 80/20 success ratio between achievable and challenging tasks. This ratio implies students should achieve success approximately 80 percent of the time, but 20 percent of the task should represent a challenge. The 80/20 ratio links directly to motivation, because if a student succeeds too often (tasks are too easy) or fails too often (tasks are too challenging), they can become bored, or lose interest and cease trying. Frequent success paired with occasional failure is one formula for maintaining high student en-

agement that can aid teachers in establishing a desired rehearsal environment. Literature selection for beginning middle/high school singers, however, may well be the number one variable affecting teacher success with developing choirs.

Repertoire must be accessible for singers to maintain a reasonable success rate. However, middle/high school developing singers often reject appropriate music taken from elementary school curricula that might seem childish or immature, so step one is that teachers must work to select age-appropriate singing material, even in the early stages of singing development. That being said, one elementary teaching strategy that should not be omitted with beginning singers who lack training and experience is the Independence Hierarchy (Bowers, 1999). Keeping students singing increases their engagement, supports

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well-paced rehearsal instruction, and serves to motivate when success is accomplished. The Independence Hierarchy structures sequenced, successive progress from unison singing through independently singing part songs (these often have identical rhythm and text, with difference occurring only among pitches – this music is the hardest for developing singers to manage yet many teachers begin with this music). Voicing the choir to create sections and then moving immediately to advanced choral literature is likely counter-productive because it may require extended drilling (banging out the harmony notes “one more time so you really have it”) that can still result in students losing the parts when sung together. In addition, rehearsal pacing, classroom management, and classroom climate generally deteriorate in rehearsals involving inappropriate music. Thus, literature selected for novice middle/high school choirs, or developmental groups of all ages, actually, plays a huge role in rehearsal success. The figure below provides an adaptation of the sequence elementary music teachers use to establish harmony singing across time. There is ample good music available that reflects each step. Teacher judgment must determine how long a choir should stay at each level. Some students will be able to move toward singing step ten

in a matter of weeks; these students are likely bright, talented, and have experience using their voices. In contrast, some choirs may not get through all steps for some or all of a school year and that’s also fine as long as they progress.

DEVELOPMENTAL HIERARCHY FOR INDEPENDENT SINGING

1. Sing a melody. For middle school mixed choirs, find phrases that fit each section. Adapt treble music for SATB singers.
2. Add an ostinato (rhythmic, melodic).
3. Sing partner songs.
4. Add a descant.
5. Sing chord roots (Choksy, 1981).
6. Add vocal chording
7. Sing phrases or sections of a round.
8. Sing a round.
9. Sing transition pieces (music containing multiple hierarchy elements).
10. Sing repertoire in two, three, or four-parts.

EXPRESSIVE PERFORMANCE (BOWERS, 2011)

Transferring knowledge from one setting to the next is made easier for students when some general principles are established for their use, i.e. rules to guide decisions about the transfers. Many beginning middle/high school music classes include students with no musical background, so rules must be very simple and related to what is also being taught by the teacher. Once students have established accurate performance (correct pitch and rhythm), they often feel their work is done – on a scale from 1 to 10, they perceive themselves as a 10. In reality, learning pitches and rhythms is actually a 10 on the goal of pitch matching and singing accuracy, but it is a ZERO on the goal of expressive singing. To move a choir forward, the teacher may choose to utilize rules and then transfer them to their concert repertoire. Since these rules can be anything valued by the teacher (there is no right or wrong set of rules), a rule allows students to generalize from piece to piece. Further, the rules may need to change with the music (various performance practice rules,

certainly) and that’s fine because it underscores the idea that decision-making (determining if something is an appropriate rule in a new setting) is an important part of critical thinking. As students progress, they should need teacher direction in their personal music making less and less. This frees the conductor to rehearse, to accomplish performance goals that reflect his or her vision of this piece – in other words, to be a conductor.

Some examples of rules appropriate for beginning middle/high school singers who have little musical background are detailed below. These serve to clarify the process and should be adapted to meet personal preferences.

RULE OF THE STEADY BEAT

When singing any note value longer than the steady beat value, the singer should crescendo. Establishing a general principal saves time and frustration by preventing errors with a rule that is applicable much of the time. The teacher/conductor must address only those instances when a crescendo is not desired or when the rule was implemented incorrectly.

RULE OF CONSONANT RELEASES

This rule can be implemented across rehearsal with all music or can be applied to each song and serves to have singers follow a guideline for most of the final consonants. The rule might structure using the last full beat, or the last half of the beat, or whatever is appropriate for the song and counting ability of the ensemble. Students assume some responsibility for releases by using the rule, which permits the conductor to address only those unique releases not suitable for rule application.

RULE OF DIPHTHONGS

Beginning singers who do not yet monitor or filter the vowel sounds produced in rehearsal should apply this rule. Identifying diphthongs and prescribing a method for performance (sing the first sound throughout most of the value and then quickly add the second sound) serves to educate and prevent most errors. When the teacher/conductor stops to address incorrect singing, this rule serves to foster student analysis of the problem (listen, identify, analyze, evaluate).

RULE OF PUNCTUATION

This rule contributes greatly to phrase awareness of beginning singers. The rule requires a lift or break for every punctuation throughout the piece. The reverse is also true: do not break if no punctuation exists (this rule is magical at correcting this with beginners). While there is certainly punctuation in prose

and poetry that is ignored for musical reasons, this rule makes singers aware that a decision must be made and allows the teacher/conductor to only teach the exceptions to the rule.

RULE OF THE SLUR

While most students can explain a slur, a surprising number of singers cannot sing one. This rule requires a tenuto over the first note under the slur, followed by all other notes in the pattern without a tenuto marking.

OTHER RULE IDEAS

Anything important in a piece can become a rule, so we teach it once and then students can use it. Such things as the Rule of Dissonance, Rule of Baroque style (or any style period), Rule of Word Stress, Rule of Dynamic Contrast, Rule of Singing Line (whatever is appropriate the piece: < >, or <<<<, etc.), Rule of Texture, ANYTHING!

There is no magic in any of these sample rules. Rules should reflect those behaviors valued by the teacher and should engage students more in the rehearsal process. Rules provide an opportunity for students to use higher order thinking skills because when an expectation is established (the rule), students must determine if it was met, or why not, if it was not met. From this beginning, students can develop judgment about applying rules; if something doesn't sound good, what could the choir do (what rule could we apply?) to improve the sound. Rules can be an excellent means for establishing independence with singers who lack formal training.

Certainly there is no one magical way to teach. The magic comes from a teacher; the person whose judgment determines what literature and what pedagogy will best suit the needs of singers in each particular choir. When choral teachers broaden their knowledge of repertoire and teaching strategies, this simply means they have a much broader range of choices; the implication being that broader choices of literature and pedagogy allow more subtle discrimination by the conductor/teacher. Staying professionally current is essential. Teaching middle/high school singers in developing choirs to become independent musicians can be boring drudgery or highly rewarding. The distance between these two perspectives in developing choirs, however, is probably quite small. One bridge that could lead from boring drudgery to highly rewarding is indeed staying current with best practice across the years – and this should perhaps be our top priority! 🎵

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