



5 Key Concepts to Improve your Choir's Blend, Resonance and Balance

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Every choral director knows what a challenge it can be to unify their ensemble's sound in order to produce a choral tone that is blended, consistent and balanced. While there are numerous factors that play a role in causing your choir to sing without a unified tone, a significant improvement can be made with just a few concepts in mind. I have had excellent success using 5 key concepts as a construct for developing a unified tone quality. I have used these at virtually every level in the educational spectrum, from junior high to collegiate singers, and have found that they go a long way toward allowing singers to quickly grasp and implement elements of technique that help produce a tone quality that is pleasant, healthy and more easily blended.

1. **An open mouth is "Home Position" for singing.** We are all taught to be very polite and keep our mouths closed when we are not talking. Having your mouth hanging open in day-to-day life is considered significantly un-couth. However, as a singer, this ideology is counterproductive. This causes us to have a concept of opening the mouth to the vowels and then instinctively, we begin to gradually close the mouth towards our comfortable closed home position. Actually, it is far better for the singer to develop a concept where home position is an open mouth, and we close to consonants.

Begin with the jaw dropped like you have just awakened from a nap with your mouth hanging open. Just let the jaw hang down as if it has no feeling or muscles in it. This is the natural, relaxed position for the lower jaw. Have your students place both hands on each side of their face like the image in the famous painting by Munch, "The Scream." Then, do 5-finger melismatic warm-up exercises, using a single vowel. I usually start with "Ah," since it is the easiest vowel with which to maintain this jaw position. Your students will be surprised at how much their jaw wants to move and help in the process of changing notes. This will also be pronounced at register changes. It really reveals how much jaw tension they have and how much they are using the jaw when it is unnecessary. Remember – **Close to consonants; don't open to vowels.**

2. **Avoid Vowel Migration.** This problem is related to the gradual closing of the mouth addressed in the concept outlined in

number one. As singers allow the mouth to gradually close, either to the instinctive closed position or toward the next consonant or vowel to be sounded, they create variances in the tone quality, resonating spaces and vowel shape. This is all the more problematic when you realize that while they are all doing this, they are all doing it at different times and rates of speed. This has a tremendously negative effect on blend, balance and tuning. They are, in effect, singing innumerable vowels and variations of vowels all at the same time, and those vowels and variables are constantly changing. Maintaining consistent space during the duration of the vowel is critical to building a unified sound, blending the ensemble and tuning within the section and the group as a whole. Have your singers place their hands on their faces again so that they can feel when the jaw moves and do a simple warm-up pattern of stepwise motion or triads using "da," "la" or "na." Do the exercise slowly so that there is ample time for the vowel to stabilize in the open position. Make sure they are using only the tip of the tongue to create the consonant so that the vowel remains formed behind the tip of the tongue. They merely need to drop the tip of the tongue down to behind the bottom teeth and the vowel is formed. Often, singers use the entire tongue against the roof of the mouth to make "ds," "ls" and "ns." Using only the tip of the tongue helps preserve the space in the mouth and keep it open and stable. Once they master this basic exercise, have them use different consonants or vowels on each scale step to practice making the shifts to the new sound late and crisply.

3. **Tongue position is critical.** It is also an issue that is often the least attended and most overlooked. Many students sing with the tongue in a relatively high position in the mouth on open vowels or with excessive rigidity in the tongue on arch-tongued vowels such as "e" and "a." First, have your students keep the tip of the tongue lightly touching the back of their bottom teeth. Often, students will have their tongue drawn back in the mouth too far, forcing it to ride high in the space and interfering with an open sound. Second, have them imagine that they are neither holding a cough drop in the middle of their tongue so that it will neither fall down the throat—a position creating a depressed larynx—nor fall out on the floor—a position where the tongue is

too arched in the mouth. On arched-tongue vowels, try get them to use a “lazy” tongue that barely arches enough to create the vowel and doesn’t feel rigid and firm to them.

4. **Tunnel vs. Cave – Through the space; not in it.** I often hear directors admonish their students to create more space in the mouth which they dutifully do. Unfortunately, the direction stops at that point and the singers lack any understanding of what to do with that space. Often the students begin to sing with the concept of sending the sound into the soft palate which effectively is similar to making sound in a cave. All the sound is contained within the cave and sound that escapes is more a product of overflow. They then begin to push and oversing in order to produce enough “overflow sound” to reach the audience. When they send the sound up and into the soft palate, they artificially darken and mute the sound, and it is not as healthy for them, vocally. Have them use the space as if it were a tunnel with an outlet for the sound—their mouth. Make the same space but let the sound move forward in the mouth to at least the joint between the soft and hard palate or even let it be focused toward the hard palate. When you get them singing through the space rather than into the space, the sound of your ensemble will come alive with vibrancy and energy as their vocal efforts are used more efficiently.

5. **Sing between the notes.** Far too often, singers focus on the first initiation of the sound and then begin to think about the next note or syllable to be performed. This causes decay in the sound between the notes, increases the issue of vowel migration and produces a sense of starting and stopping sound on each note. While it dramatically affects the consistency of the sound negatively, it is also highly detrimental to the creation of phrase shape and phrase direction. They begin to sing with a note-based concept rather than a motive or larger phrase-based concept. I demonstrate this often by merely talking to the students with significant hesitations between the spoken words. “Hey, - - let’s - - - go - - - have - - - a - - - soda.” We don’t talk that way, but we often sing that way. Have them sing with a concept in mind like pouring water from a bottle. The flow of water is like tone production in singing. If we place our hand over the mouth of the bottle and release it as it pours out, the flow hesitates briefly or stops and starts. This is note-to-note singing. Have them sing as if they are only touching the stream of water lightly with one finger about 6 inches below the mouth of the bottle. This would deviate the stream without stopping it, just as we should do with our sound as we sing. This is the concept they need to have in mind in order to keep a steady, legato and consistent flow of tone.

Try these ideas and see if you don’t hear a difference in your groups. With consistent attention and practice, these five basic concepts should go a long way to improving the blend, resonance and tonal consistency of your choral group.

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continued from “Doctor,” p. 15

to move anything except for his head and eyes. He was on a breathing machine with a tube that went down his throat, and if he was staying for a long period of time, the battery powered machine had to be plugged in. He also required 24 hour care by a parent or a nurse in case he needed his throat suctioned. How could my class help him?

Oh how naïve I was. I was taught so much by this young man even after my many years of experience. He was brilliant and aware of everything that was going on around him. His mind was just trapped in his disabled body. His nurse asked for a set of music that he could follow from a music stand while pages were turned for him. The other choir students were great with Justin and reached out to him, greeting him as they came into class and saying “bye,” when he had to leave early. His mother told me he would go home and “sing” the choir songs through his computer. He was getting something out of the class, and he wanted more. I want you to know that Justin was at every performance in his uniform and on stage with us. He became a part of us and taught so much about acceptance and compassion. At the end of the year, the class voted Justin the “Outstanding Concert Choir Member.”

What an incredible gift he gave to my students. The gift of acceptance and music is for everyone from the star football player and outstanding vocalist to the homeless girl and those amazing students with special needs. Choir is an even playing field where all types of people join together to create beautiful art.

Conclusion

As we left our colleges and ventured out into the “real” world, I truly believe most of us were prepared for the musical part of the job. But I’m sure you’ve heard many teachers say, “They sure didn’t teach that in college!” Teaching choir goes way beyond the notes and words on the page. We are shaping human beings into beautiful people. Teenagers are starving for something solid and real, and music, especially choral music, has the ability to give that to them.

We need to be a part of our students’ world, being seen as a teacher that attends other school events, showing school spirit and applauding students’ efforts where and whenever they excel. Contrary to popular belief, students are human beings too! We are just a little (a lot) older and hopefully wiser. We were once in their shoes, needing to be loved and respected. Of course, we need to “lay the hammer down” now and then—wisely. We also need to create an environment where everyone feels loved and accepted—where the not-so-popular kids can be loved without judgment and the popular kids don’t have to put on a show every second of every day.

I had to think long and hard about why students confide in me and why so many find my room to be a refuge. I think it just comes down to the fact that I try to be passionate about my job and passionate about my students’ education and want them to succeed and be the best person they can possibly be. And if I can be of some help to them in achieving that success, then that’s good enough for me.

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