Research Report

Bryan E. Nichols, editor

Teach Expression First! Applying Research Results to the Rehearsal

by Rebecca L. Atkins and Craig R. Hurley

Whether in the context of rehearsals or performances, one of the greatest joys for an artist and teacher is to hear the choir effectively embody the appropriate dynamics, phrasing, articulations, tone, and connection to the text, culminating in a genuine heartfelt expressive performance. Finding ways to lead students to consistently sing musically in both rehearsal and performance requires a plethora of teaching strategies.[1] Jaques-Dalcroze held the belief that students should concurrently learn rhythm, pitch, and expressive elements.[2] Similarly, Robert Shaw incorporated expressive elements early in the learning process by combining each element of a song (rhythm, pitch, or text, with expressivity) in various ways during rehearsals, aiming to create a precise and expressive performance.[3] Both Jaques-Dalcroze and Shaw regarded all four elements (rhythm, pitch, text, and expression) of a song as equally significant contributors to the overall performance. Similarly, some choral method textbook authors suggest expression should be learned early in the song-learning sequence.[4] However, other authors advocate rhythm, text, and pitches should be learned first, with the introduction of expression at a later stage when learning a song.[5] With this conflicting information, we decided to run a series of studies to test the timing of adding expressive elements in song acquisition.

To explore the most effective timing on when to introduce expressive elements, we created two variations of a pre-recorded learning sequence. The first we called an infused-expression learning sequence which incorporated expressive elements (i.e., dynamics, articulations) alongside rhythm, pitch, and text. For example, students listened to the text spoken in rhythm performed with expression, and then were prompted to echo the text in rhythm with the expressive qualities phrase by phrase. Then singers listened and echoed the text and rhythm sung on pitch with expression phrase by phrase. Conversely, what we called the post-expression sequence, choirs were introduced to rhythm, pitch, and text first, then prompted to add expression as the last step. Songs learned under the infused-expression learning sequence were performed with significantly more expression compared to those learned under the post-expression learning sequence whether singing solo[6] or in a group.[7]

In a fourth study, a modification was made to the vocal model.[8] The vocal model was expressive throughout the learning sequence, regardless of whether expressive elements were being emphasized or not. Surprisingly, in this study, there were no statistical difference between the songs learned, whether an infused- or post-expression sequence, though the results approached significance (p = .059). The mean percentage of expression ratings were higher on songs learned through the in-

fused-expression sequence compared to songs learned through the post-expression sequence. Expressive vocal modeling can be especially powerful when performed from the very beginning of the song learning sequence. Kinesthetic movement in an infused-expression sequence also improved expressive performance in sixth graders.[9]
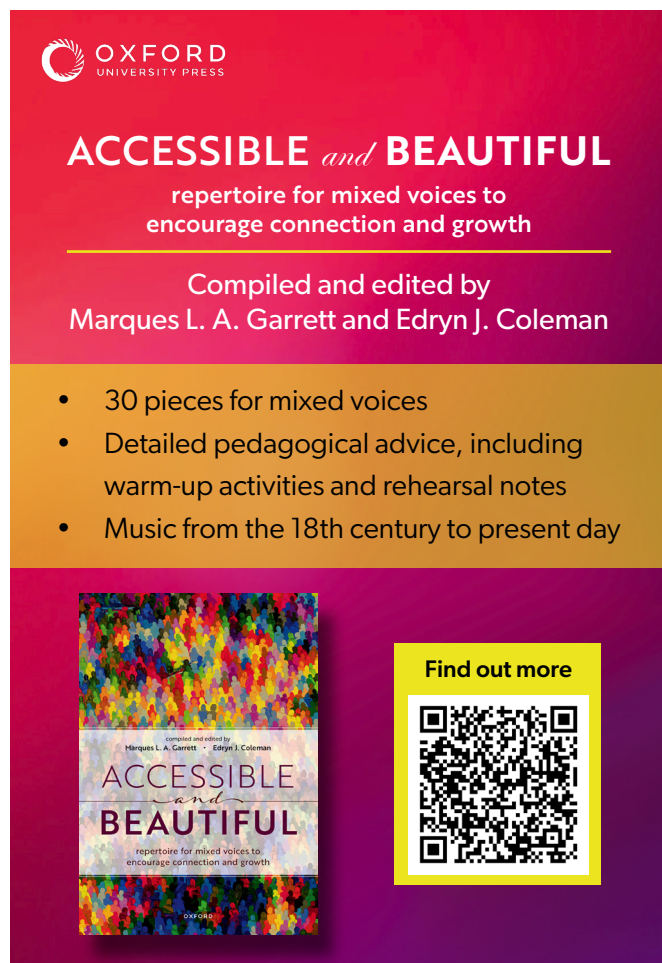
Applications to the Choral Rehearsal

Teaching using an infused-expression approach with and without kinesthetic movements, could be utilized when teaching any song. To ensure success from all students, teachers should complete at least two successful expressive repetitions between each step as outlined below. Furthermore, asking students to evaluate what they do and hear keeps the challenge level high enough for students who are successful the first time.

A choir exploring singing harmony but not reading notation yet could first practice identifying the four expressive elements they will perform in the round "Ghost of Tom" by sound. First, students should be able to perform expressive elements accurately in a warm-up, then be facilitated through this infused-expression sequence focused on expressive elements as they learn the song (see Figure 1 on the next page—expressive elements added).

Students will:

1. Listen to the teacher sing an expressive performance of the song.

2. Listen again and then turn to their neighbor and "Talk about things they noticed that made this song interesting and expressive."

3. Listen to expressive model again and create a movement matching what they hear.

4. Listen again and perform the movements they created.

5. Answer questions (or turn and talk) about why they chose the movement they created and how the movement matched the sounds they heard.

6. Echo first line and movement performed by the teacher (picking a movement from a student) with expression.

7. Echo second phrase and movement with expression.

8. (Continue the rote process phrase by phrase focusing on expression.)

9. Perform the entire song with expressive elements using movements.

10. Perform the entire song with expressive elements without the movements.

11. Perform the song with or without movements against the teacher starting later.

12. Split in two groups and perform in a round with movements and then without movements.

13. Split in three and four groups and start at different times based on success rate of two groups with or without movements as needed for success.

The next sequence is for a choir who reads notation but may become frustrated if unable to read all four elements (pitch, rhythm, pitch, and text) at one time. A focus on just one element like rhythm paired with expression creates more frequent moments of successful attempts compared to unsuccessful attempts (positive reinforcement of target skill). The lesson targets are musically important, at an appropriate skill level of difficulty, achievable quickly, and an audible change is heard by the students.[10] Mastering smaller chunks suc-

cessfully rather than repeating a more difficult skill unsuccessfully may spur energy and motivation.

In the warm-ups, students practice echoing, decoding, and reading paired eighth notes, quarter notes, and dotted half notes in common time with expression (steps 1-3 below). Through the following infused-expression sequence focused on expressive elements, singers would learn the main chorus of *Hine Ma Tov* arranged by Naplan[11] using notation focused on musical expression (see Figure 2).

Students will:

1. Echo rhythm patterns from the song with various expressive qualities by clapping and speaking rhythm syllables.

2. Listen to teacher's expressive rhythmic patterns and decode using syllables.
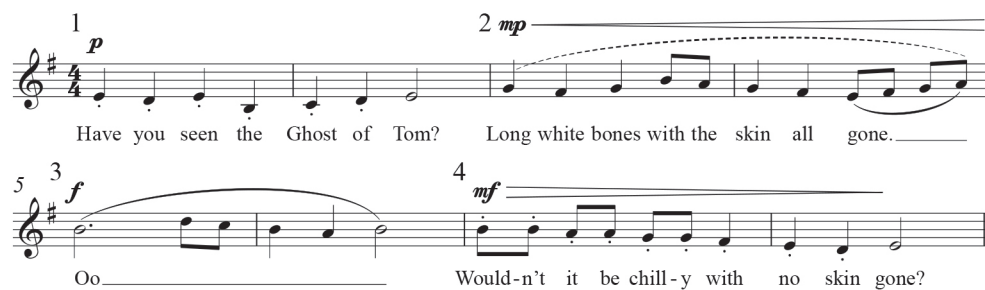

Figure 1. Traditional Round, *Ghost of Tom.*

Figure 2. Allan Naplan arr., *Hine Ma Tov.*
(articulations added)

3. Decode various rhythm flashcards using rhythm syllables.

4. Look at Figure 1 and read the rhythms of the melody expressively.

5. Reinforce expressive rhythm reading by adding kinesthetic supports: claps on the accents and legato hands on the legato notes (as shown by a slur).

6. Listen and apply teacher feedback on expression and repeat until successful.

7. Echo sing the melody on solfa, keeping rhythmic and expressive elements.

8. Echo speak text, still including expressive elements while following notation.

9. Echo sing text, still including expressive elements while following notation.

A choir who reads music fairly well, applies solfège to octavos, and is able to hold harmonies between voice parts could be successful using the following infused-expression approach. To prime the students for the expressive elements, students would read the text only (no music notation) of *Homeward Bound* (SATB, Alfred Publishing, https://content.alfred.com/catpages/00-7845.pdf)[12] and discuss the meaning of the text and what expressive elements they would expect to perform with this text. Then, students follow this sequence utilizing questions and feedback interspersed throughout for successful execution of the expressive elements and musical content.

Students will:

1. Look at the solo melody line on page 7 (last page) and decide and mark where the breaths should be based on the text and melodic line. (View a score preview at the URL listed above)

2. Justify those choices with neighbors and then discuss how the tempo, meter, and dynamic changes at the end express the text and emotion.

3. Conduct and speak (legato) the rhythm with preferred counting system and breathe at chosen places (pick note up to 54-59). (repeat as needed)

4. Sing the tonic triad and starting pitch.

5. Sing the solo line on a lip buzz with piano doubling the part (if needed), breathing at the agreed upon places through m 59.

6. Sing again on a lip buzz, adding crescendo and decrescendo, adding a movement flowing across the body following crescendo, changing directions at the breath and showing the decrescendo.

7. Sing again on a lip buzz, with movement and expression, no piano.

8. Sing on an [u] vowel with the connected legato line, and all expressive markings no piano.

9. Sing on an [u] vowel in the same way with piano accompaniment.

10. Take 30 seconds to figure out the solfège in parts (m. 60-end) noting the dynamics and tempo changes.

11. Practice singing on solfège with sections in circles, adding expression and tempo changes (2 minutes).

12. Come together and sing as a group with expression on solfège with piano.

13. Compare and contrast singing the end with and without the optional breath and choose as a class.

14. Sing ending with expressive qualities on lip buzz with piano support.

15. Sing ending with expression on an [u] vowel without piano support

16. Perform entire page with expression on [u] with all expressive qualities with accompaniment.

In this short segment, students learn the main melody of the piece focused immediately on singing a legato line with correct phrasing, using the technical skill to sing the crescendo and decrescendo while executing long phrases. Solfège was not needed on the solo line and was added as a support on the harmony section. Also notice the scaffolding where either the support of the piano or movements is removed each step until students are independently singing with no help. In the next lesson, following a quick review of the expressive elements and melody on the last page, teachers could choose to add text to the last page keeping the expressive elements, or have students apply the expressive elements of the last page to the beginning of the song.

Why This Approach Works

• More opportunities for successful repetitions and expressive feedback

Introducing expression early in the song learning process keeps the focus on the musicality rather than the notes and rhythms, providing ample opportunities to hone expressive skills. How often do teachers hear students say they are done learning the piece because they know the notes and rhythms already? Learning the song is not the objective! Singing beautifully and artistically is the objective! The song is only the content in which students apply and practice specific musical skills and vocal technique in the same way students in a literature class identify concepts (theme, plot line, protagonist, character growth, foreshadowing, setting, etc.) and apply to each new book they read. When expression is integrated and rehearsed from the initial stages of learning, conductors have more chances to offer feedback, repetitions, and questions about expressive elements. Focusing the rehearsal on expression makes expression more important to students than learning "the song."

• Students learn one version and develop and practice only one motor skill

Singing forte is a different technical skill than singing piano in terms of breath, energy, balance, and blend. Having multiple repetitions results in multiple correct repetitions reinforcing the motor skill needed for the technique. For example, after rehearsing the entire piece mezzo forte for several weeks to learn notes and rhythms, suddenly changing to singing softly requires a different motor skill/vocal technique altogether. All the repetitions learned on notes and rhythms without expression must be "undone" and replaced with successful repetitions to develop the new technique. Expressive musicianship is fundamental to all students' development and should not be delayed until technique is in place. "Technique exists so that it is possible to make music—therefore, it is important to remember that making music is the reason for technique, and not the reverse. This is an inseparable partnership."[13]

How to Be Successful Using This Approach

Planning! Planning! Planning!

Choir directors often juggle multiple responsibilities, are pressed for time, and may find themselves learning a song alongside their students during rehearsals, resulting in expressive elements being added as an afterthought towards the end of the learning process. To ensure that expression is integrated from the start, directors must find time to score study and have a plan to be able to lead with expression first. Expert teachers have a clear auditory image of the piece at hand before beginning rehearsals and model beautifully and expressively throughout the rehearsal.[14] While this plan may change during rehearsals, having a solid foundation is crucial.

Challenges of This Approach

• No way can students do that many things at once!

Small sequence steps are key to success. Teaching expression early in the song learning sequence requires students to perform multiple skills at the same time. When confident on each individual skill, performing multiple skills can be rewarding, but attempting to perform multiple skills without confidence can lead to feelings of anxiety and stress. Successful teachers have lesson targets that are positioned at a level of difficulty

that is close enough to the student's current skill level that the targets are achievable in the short term.[15] It is the responsibility of the teachers to provide a balance of challenge and support for the students (see Figure 3).
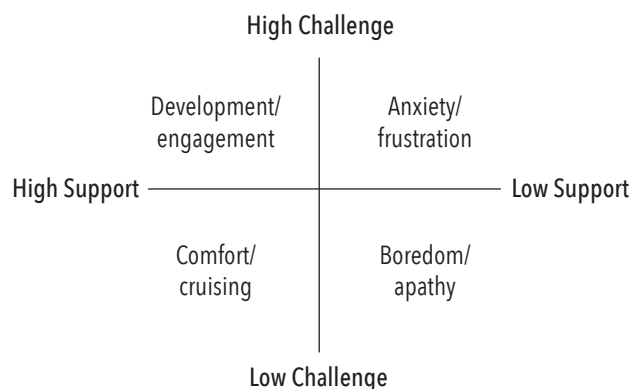
High Challenge

| Development/ engagement | Anxiety/ frustration |

High Support ——————————— **Low Support**

| Comfort/ cruising | Boredom/ apathy |

Low Challenge

Figure 3: Teaching-learning zones based on Mariani's[16] teaching style framework

Rehearsals can be derailed if students are asked to perform high level skills without the necessary support for success. Just like climbing a ladder with missing rungs, asking students to perform expressively without a proper foundation can leave students feeling exposed and unsupported. Be intentional of the scaffolding included in the sequence.

• *The performance is soon! We have to get through all the music!*
   Introducing expression at an early stage may feel initially as slowing down the learning process. In rehearsal, it is more advantageous to teach smaller portions of a song with expression rather than larger sections without expression. Previously in our teaching careers, we could cover sixteen measures of a song during a rehearsal, but with the inclusion of expression, we may only get to eight measures. The good news is expressive ideas often recur throughout the piece. Therefore, students can apply the musical expression ideas learned from the initial eight measures to the subsequent 8, and transfers to future music, ultimately saving time in the overall learning process.

Conclusion

Focusing on artistry transfers to a more expressive performance which audiences enjoy and rank higher than musical skill when attending a concert.[17] Unlike rhythm, pitch, or text, expression allows for individual interpretation by the director and performer. As the director of the choir, an important job is to interpret the music in a meaningful expressive way. Even if the expression markings are not in the octavo, directors have the freedom to make artistic choices. Encouraging the students to be a part of the interpretation process helps them develop into more expressive musicians.

Teaching expression first allows students to concentrate on learning the expressive version of a song thereby simplifying the rehearsal, and focuses students on artistry. Since we began incorporating expression right from the start in rehearsals, we have observed a marked difference in the expressiveness of our choirs' performances. This concept spurred our series of research studies, and the results of these studies support this initial observation.[18] Through multiple expressive repetitions, our students have gained more confidence and are able to fully immerse in the moment. Infusing expression throughout the learning sequence has injected life and joy into our rehearsals that sometimes felt like drudgery. Learning only one version (an expressive one) of the song, providing more opportunities for expressive repetitions, and focusing on expressive feedback have all contributed to the improvement of artistry in our ensembles. CJ

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NOTES

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