



On the Voice

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Creating a Tapestry of Color: Mindfully Approaching Choral Tone

by Emily Frizzell

With recent emphasis on diversity initiatives and culturally responsive pedagogy in the choral classroom, choral music educators are reexamining methods for introducing diverse styles of choral music to their students. Teachers looking to instruct students in diverse repertoire may find themselves lacking the skills and experience to do so in a way that stays true to the style in question. Therefore, the exploration of respectful methods of appropriate performance practice is ongoing.¹

Every individual style of music is unique. Texture, instrumentation, historical period, and harmonic progression are some of the defining characteristics of a musical style.² In choral music, one of the most salient stylistic characteristics is the choral tone of the singers. Gospel, spirituals, jazz, country, and blues are all styles of music that developed in the United States, yet they all require a unique vocal tone production. Singing any of these styles of music in a choral setting requires authenticity to the distinctive style. With so many unique styles of music from around the world now more readily accessible than ever before, choir teachers looking to skillfully teach diverse repertoire have their work cut out for them. Some understanding of choral tone production techniques from various cultural and stylistic

perspectives is necessary to effectively produce authentic choral performance practice across musical styles.

The purpose of this article is to share information and strategies for teachers beginning to explore non-classical styles of choral singing, including contemporary Western styles and styles from around the world. We will begin with a brief discussion on the benefits of programming music of diverse styles, after which we will review the barriers to programming in diverse styles, including the preservice educational experience of choir teachers in the United States. The article will conclude with practical applications for choir directors looking to empower their students through a more comprehensive education in choral tone.

Benefits of Programming Diverse Styles of Music

To understand the value of studying diverse choral tone practices, choral directors must first explore the value of programming music from various cultural backgrounds. The United States national standards direct choral music educators to relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical contexts, providing students with opportunities to demonstrate

an understanding of relationships between music, other disciplines, and their daily lives.³ These standards are used to create choral music curricula and textbooks, which can then be referenced by teachers when planning lessons.

Choral music educators who program music of diverse styles see the intrinsic value of providing their students with a range of choral experiences. Additionally, including music from cultures represented in the ensemble can provide many unique opportunities. For example, students from the represented culture can take on leadership roles in teaching music and sharing their culture with their peers.

Choral styles outside the classical singing norms can also prove beneficial to students. A few examples are contemporary a cappella, gospel, and barbershop. Contemporary a cappella is touted as an effective means of teaching independent musicianship and nurturing students' artistic expression.⁴ Gospel music, traditionally taught by rote, provides inclusivity and community for musicians of various music-reading abilities.⁵ It can also be a safe place for students to practice improvisation and singing with spontaneity and a sense of freedom.⁶ Barbershop harmonies require impeccable intonation to achieve the desired characteristic ring.⁷ Regardless of the style, all choral music has something to offer.

Barriers to Programming Diverse Styles of Music

Although there are numerous benefits to teaching music in diverse styles, teachers face barriers when endeavoring to teach music in styles that may be unfamiliar to them. In Stefanie Cash's 2019 survey, teachers self-reported their greatest perceived barrier is a fear of misrepresenting foreign cultures.⁸ Perceived barriers also included difficulty accessing authentic arrangements and text pronunciation guides. Additionally, teachers expressed concern about students' vocal health and interest in or maturity with unfamiliar styles of music.

Vocal health concerns may be further barriers to teachers' programming of diverse repertoire. There has long existed a perception amongst vocal music professionals that singing in nonclassical styles can be unhealthy; however, there is little evidence to support that there is one optimal singing technique.⁹ Theoretically, vocalizing in any style could be done in unhealthy ways if singers unknowingly employ unhealthy singing habits. Similarly, arguments exist that singing in unfamiliar styles can be damaging to the voice since singers haven't been sufficiently trained in the unfamiliar style and, therefore, lack the specialized knowledge of its practices.¹⁰ While there may be validity to this particular concern, its mere existence is further evidence that choir directors should be training in and familiarizing their choristers with various singing styles.

Diverse Music Styles in Choral Music Teacher Education

The National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) handbook stipulates that undergraduate music programs develop "increased understanding of musical achievements from various analytical, historical, and cultural perspectives [and] musical perspectives informed by studies of various cultures and historical periods."¹¹ However, not all American choral music education programs are the same, and with so much content to cover, they may not fully prepare preservice music educators to teach diverse styles of music to their future students. Choral music education programs may not require courses like vocal pedagogy or choral literature, and even the ones that offer such courses may



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focus primarily on Western classical choral music.¹²

Therefore, some undergraduates may only learn how to sing in non-Western languages and styles by doing so in choral ensembles or applied voice lessons. This can be problematic, as some choir directors may focus the majority of rehearsal and performance time on music from the dominant culture.¹³ Additionally, many applied voice teachers primarily focus on bel canto-style singing with their students. This tendency to focus on what is most familiar can result in a gap in knowledge, contributing to the perpetuation of ignorance, transfer of misinformation to students, or even inappropriate or offensive performance practices of music from cultures not native to the ensemble.¹⁴

Tone production of the ensemble is one specific aspect of performance practice in choral music that can be particularly delicate. When music styles of a community reflect the diverse cultures within that community, disparate ideas about performance practices, like considerations regarding choral tone, can exist.¹⁵ Directors may have preconceived notions of what constitutes “good” tone. How can choral directors be expected to educate their singers in authentic tone production across a variety of music styles when they have not been wholly educated in it themselves?

Implementing Stylistically Appropriate Choral Tone in Diverse Music Styles

How singers approach nonclassical styles depends on the traditional style and its historically appropriate performance practices. Since choir directors typically spend four or more years in college studying primarily bel canto-style singing and the Western choral tradition, there are many vocal techniques to which they haven't been exposed. For instance, they are trained in maintaining a low larynx and elongating vowels—great for singing Palestrina and Verdi, but not always the best tools for singing in styles that require variations of belting. Many belting styles, for example, require the larynx to be raised and the mouth to be spread more horizontally to achieve a brighter vowel.¹⁶

In an attempt to support choir directors as they introduce diverse repertoire to their choristers, here are three ideas for developing stylistically appropriate and healthy tone production across various styles of singing.

They are intended to serve as a quick and easy-to-implement starting place for teachers interested in branching out into diverse styles of repertoire.

1. Share Characteristic Vocal Models with Your Students.

Singers must have an impression of the desired vocal sound before they can effectively produce the sound.¹⁷

- When introducing new styles of singing to your ensembles, play recordings of ensembles and soloists native to the style. When possible, bring in guest artists or friends who are experienced in the style to present, model, and teach. College professors and local voice teachers can be great resources as models of vocal tone for new and diverse musical programming.
- Listen to *several* vocal models within a style—not just one—so that the stylistic characteristics, rather than the individual singer's or choir's characteristics, become familiar to the ensemble.¹⁸
- In the same vein, provide opportunities for your students to listen to more songs in the style than the one your choir may be performing. Diversifying the singers' aural experiences may contribute to a more efficient learning process when introducing diverse repertoire.¹⁹ The more familiar they are with a style, the more likely they are to produce the characteristic sounds with ease.

2. Incorporate Diverse Foundational Vocal Production Skills into Warm-Ups.

Students who spend the entirety of warm-ups developing their classical voices cannot be expected to healthily, readily, or appropriately sing anything other than the classical style. When students practice using resonators and articulators in various ways, they are more likely able to imitate the differences between tone production techniques. Allow time for practicing nonclassical tone production early in the learning cycle and early in the rehearsal to reinforce new habits that could benefit students as they learn new styles of music. Once they are familiar with these sensations, they can recall them when needed in rehearsal and apply them to the diverse music styles they are learning.

Here are some specific elements of tone that can

vary with the style of the piece and some exercises for practicing each:

- **Nasality** can be appropriate in certain styles of singing. Since nasality is controlled by the soft palate, explore the spectrum of nasality with your students by raising and lowering the soft palate during vocal warm-ups.²⁰ Students can try yawning to feel the soft palate lifting (while being careful not to overextend the jaw during the yawn). Another common technique is to pinch the nose closed while singing a pitch. If there is nasality in the tone, the sound of the voice will change when the nose is pinched; if there is no nasality, the sound will not change.²¹

- Many teachers already implement techniques to help students **blend vocal registers**, but these techniques can be particularly useful when teaching music that emphasizes the use of singers' less-developed registers.²²

Try using exercises like sirens that start high in the range and work down to bridge the gap(s) between registers.²³ It can also be helpful to implement a “speech-to-singing” routine, in which students speak the text of a piece using increasingly higher dynamics until they are at the *forte* level and then switch to speech-singing at varying dynamic levels.²⁴ These exercises can help singers become more familiar with all areas of their voice rather than only the registers used for classical singing styles. A soprano who primarily sings in her head register, for example, will become more experienced in using mixed and chest registers, which could support her in singing various styles of music, like contemporary commercial, gospel, or jazz.

- Varied methods of **vocal onset** are used across musical styles. In vocal warm-ups, try having students sing the syllable “ha” to sensationalize a breathy onset, “uh” to sensationalize a glottal onset, and [a] to sensational-

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ize a coordinated onset.²⁵

- For maximum intelligibility, Western contemporary popular and musical theatre styles tend to emphasize the **speechlike pronunciation of vowels**.²⁶ Moving the “hump” of the tongue more forward, like in speech, can increase intelligibility and provide the brighter sound these styles require.²⁷ Provide students with opportunities to try vowel modification exercises, particularly those that involve intentional tongue movement, to help students become aware of the sensations that simultaneously alter the vowel and *brightness* of the tone.

- A lowered larynx may be best for singing in classical styles, but it is not the only option. **Varying degrees of raised laryngeal placement** can contribute to healthy and stylistically appropriate tone production in contemporary and some non-Western styles of singing.²⁸ When I first learned this concept, I was confused because it conflicted with what I had learned in all my years of vocal training. Working with a brilliant teacher, I learned how to be flexible with my larynx to achieve the desired tone across different styles and was amazed at how quickly I learned to access parts of my voice that hadn’t previously been developed.

To begin exploring laryngeal placement with students, try having them gently rest a hand on their throat to feel the larynx move up and down with swallowing and yawning to become familiar with the sensations associated with laryngeal placement. Then play around with how it feels to sing with a raised larynx. I suggest starting with the syllable “yeah” on descending pentascals, rearticulating on each pitch, and sliding through all the vowel sounds. “Yeah”—or “nyeah” if that works better—allow for nasality, forward placement, and horizontal spread of the mouth, which can facilitate healthy singing with the larynx raised.

- The easiest way to recreate a singing style is to “put your face in the right place.”²⁹ While classical singers anchor the larynx and relax the tongue and jaw, many high belters jut out their jaw, ramp their tongue, and raise their cheeks.³⁰ Of course, these specific techniques aren’t for every style or every singer, but it is noteworthy that **facial expressions** can help put the

larynx in the right place for the desired tone production. It could be helpful to watch videos of professional choirs of differing cultural or stylistic backgrounds to note and mimic their facial expressions while singing. Encourage your students to try out various facial positions when singing warm-ups so they can actively feel the sensations associated with different styles of singing.

3. *Develop a System.*

While many choir directors involve themselves in the choral network by attending professional development conferences and participating in professional learning communities, it can be challenging for them to take the time needed to actually implement the suggestions from experts in the network.³¹ Choir directors are already stretched thin between score study, fundraising, after-school rehearsals, performances, and all the administrative tasks involved in teaching.³² How can choir directors go about appropriately and thoroughly educating choir students in a variety of tone practices without adding significantly more to their already full plates?

- Save concert programs, professional development session handouts, repertoire guides, repertoire suggestions, slide shows, recordings, presenters’ contact information, and any other useful resources.


- While you’re sitting in professional development sessions, scan any handouts and other resources with a scanning app on your phone (JotNot, for example).

- Compile the resources you collect to make them more readily accessible when planning time is limited. Keep all resources in one easily accessible place online (e.g., Google Drive, Dropbox), on your computer desktop, or even in your desk drawer. That way, you may be more likely to put these valuable resources to use in meaningful ways when teaching your students about choral tone in diverse styles or anything else new, for that matter!

Conclusion

It is imperative to recognize that certain practices in choral tone are appropriate in certain contexts. Choir directors and students may have diverse backgrounds

in music, so it is likely that some styles of music will be unfamiliar to the director, some students, or all involved. Teachers who lack background in certain choral tone practices will likely need guidance as they become equipped to teach choral music from diverse stylistic backgrounds.

This article is meant to be a starting point, and these suggestions are intended to help choir directors begin to explore varied tone production techniques that could be useful in teaching music of styles outside the bel canto realm. There are many other practical steps choir directors can take to inform teaching practices in choral tone. Following research-based suggestions for choral tone development in various styles can open the door to a world of diverse repertoire for choral teachers and students. Facilitating students' exploration of all registers and placements in their voices is quite possibly the most important mechanism for guiding them through any unfamiliar stylistic territory. The more familiar choristers are with all parts of their voice and how to use them, the more easily they can comfortably and healthily produce sounds needed for diverse styles of music. 

Additional Resources

- Theodore Dimon, Jr., *Anatomy of the Voice: An Illustrated Guide for Singers, Vocal Coaches, and Speech Therapists* (North Atlantic Books, 2018).
- National Association of Teachers of Singing: Science-Informed Voice Pedagogy Resources: https://www.nats.org/cgi/page.cgi/Science-Informed_Voice_Pedagogy_Resources.html
- Summer Institutes and Workshops, such as:
 - Shenandoah University's CCM Vocal Pedagogy Institute: <https://www.ccmstitute.com/>
 - Westminster Choir College's Voice Pedagogy Institute: <https://www.rider.edu/academics/colleges-schools/college-arts-sciences/westminster-choir-college/programs-opportunities/voice-pedagogy-institute>

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NOTES

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