



### Four-Year University Choirs



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#### **The Growing Voice: Collegiate Voice Students and the Large Ensemble**

by Matthew Myers

One of the many joys of working with choral ensembles is witnessing singers' growth over time. Choral directors often work with the same students for several years and see them develop from beginners to leaders. Whereas middle school and high school choral directors typically work with students through their voice changes, college directors meet students whose voices are a bit more stable in range—though they are still bound to develop and change rapidly.

The experience levels of singers in a non-auditioned college ensemble can be especially vast: the ensemble may include new music majors with years of performance experience, nonmajors who have been in choir for several years and may have taken voice lessons, some instrumental music majors who read music well but have never sung in a formal setting, and some beginners who have always wanted to learn to sing and signed up for the class as an arts credit. The ensemble will grow together and develop skills over the semester, and then in January the ensemble will look completely different as some students move into another choir, some remain, and some new students arrive.

The ever-changing landscape of the choir is a challenge for the conductor, but it also provides opportunities to establish a baseline of vocal training that is helpful for both beginners and seasoned singers. For many of the non-music majors, their choral directors serve as their only music professors, so we can provide them opportunities to grow in all the standards of music education. For the music majors, they may be in as many as eight to ten classes with different music professors and will gain a wealth of knowledge and perspectives. Their voice lessons, like choir, will provide them with consistent work with a mentor they will have for a few

years. Developing a positive relationship with the voice students and their teachers can improve the learning and performing opportunities for all students in the choir.

Many voice majors come into their college studies with a wealth of experience in their middle school and high school choirs, with stage experience from musical theatre and a performance background from solo/ensemble contest, but many of them have never had a private voice lesson. As they enter their weekly voice studies as college students, their voices often grow rapidly in size and range, and sometimes this can cause confusion, as the way they sing in an ensemble begins to feel different. They experience cognitive dissonance and may grow frustrated when their voice doesn't work in the same way it once did. Rather than shying away from these changes, we should embrace them and talk about them regularly! Singing in choir, whether it is twice a week or five times a week, is a great way for these students to develop their skills, and a repertoire with varied ranges, tessituras, languages, articulations, and styles will help them to grow in each part of their voice. Differentiating collegiate choir instruction to help individual singers grow will enhance the variety of tone colors the choir can draw upon in their repertoire.

One challenge of working with young voice students is the concept of a stable voice type. A student who enters college having only ever sung alto in choir may soon realize with their voice teacher that they ought to work on soprano repertoire in voice lessons. This student may still feel most successful singing alto parts in choir or may benefit from switching to soprano II. This could change after a semester. Most students can successfully sing several voice parts without causing strain or vocal damage, and this may need to change by the year or by the semester depending on their vocal growth as well as the needs of the ensemble.

It can be particularly helpful to encourage students to identify themselves just as singers rather than growing attached to their voice types (e.g., "Susie Jones, voice" rather than "Susie Jones, mezzo-soprano"). It is also helpful for the whole choir to understand that many alto I's will perform soprano literature in voice lessons,

many tenor II's will perform baritone literature in voice lessons, and so on. The solo voice type and choral part do not need to—and often should not—match. The voice type may also shift as the voice continues to develop. To ensure that students do not feel pigeonholed into one voice part, listen to their voices each semester or quarter and record their ranges and comfortable tessituras. This is a great way to observe their growth and document it quantitatively, as so many elements of their growth are more qualitative.

Another challenge of working with students with differing experience levels is finding a uniform level of projection within the choir. Some students, in their attempt to “blend,” use only a small portion of their vocal power most of the time and may not even be heard within the choral texture. On the contrary, some students in voice lessons may use their fullest dy-

namics most of the time, as they have learned to create more colorful and powerful sounds in their lessons. To achieve a uniform sound, singers do not all need to sing “off the voice.” A first step toward a more unified sound can be to encourage the singers with smaller voices to sing out more. When they can be heard within the choir, the larger voices will not stick out as much. It is also vitally important to take the choir through a voice placement process to match the tone qualities of the singers with those around them. (I highly recommend viewing Weston Noble’s “Achieving Choral Blend through Standing Position” and Charlene Archibeque’s “How to Make a Good Choir Sound Great” to get some examples of how to implement a voice placement process.)

When the voices have been matched across their sections, the students with bigger voices will be able

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to project healthily without sticking out of the choir, and the students with lighter voices will be able to hear themselves. Of course, there may be a student or two who projects beyond the dynamics in the score, and an individual recommendation for that student to back off a bit can be helpful. Often, using a mathematical percentage (“10% less sound on this note”) can guide them to match the desired dynamic better than simply saying “softer” (which could result in them singing at half voice).

Students who are in voice lessons and choir may have more music to memorize in a semester than they ever imagined might be on their plates. Singers love to get involved in many aspects of music making, and some will find themselves in multiple choirs, an opera or musical theatre production, an a cappella group, and a paid church position. They may have forty or more pieces to memorize within a semester. If they haven’t yet developed solid practice habits, this can feel extremely overwhelming. Luckily, we as choral directors can help them build the skills to manage all the music on their plates without burning out—or losing their voices.

First, prioritizing music literacy in choir is vital to students’ ability to learn their music efficiently. While some choral students will likely be concurrently enrolled in music theory and ear training, many are not, so even two minutes of sight singing in a choral rehearsal could prove helpful in building and maintaining the literacy skills they need to learn their music. Second, we can teach the music in a streamlined manner that promotes retention and mitigates the need for copious additional memorization practice. By teaching the music in small enough “chunks” and regularly rehearsing the transitions from one section to the next, we make the memorization process easier. In-class memory checks midway through the rehearsal process can also help more than simply expecting students to have everything memorized by concert week. Giving them different memorization dates for each piece can lower the pressure and help focus their practice as well. These memorization techniques can work just as well for the students as they learn the music for their other performance opportunities; sometimes it can be helpful to give them a quick reminder to transfer this knowledge from the choral re-

hearsal to the practice room.

Another way to assist students who are taking voice lessons is to speak the language of the voice teacher in choir. When rehearsing pieces in other languages, provide International Phonetic Alphabet guides. This will help them to build their diction skills and can save a lot of time that would otherwise be spent speaking every syllable repeatedly. Be aware of the transition spots in students’ vocal ranges and be prepared to offer vowel modification options so that they can sing healthily and without strain in those challenging spots. Stay current on vocal pedagogy by attending voice-based sessions at your next ACDA conference or attend a NATS conference to deepen your knowledge. Reminding singers that their voice is one instrument used in both choir and voice lessons—not two distinct voices—will help to mitigate the cognitive dissonance they undergo as college voice students.

It is a unique pleasure to be able to work with a student from the time they enter your school until their graduation. From a student’s first college choir audition to their final voice recital, their voice will grow immensely in size and flexibility. Being part of that vocal growth is an honor that should not be taken for granted. Helping students to maximize their individual development within the group setting of choir is a challenge, but in time, it will improve the sound of your choir, assist in positive relationship building between choral and vocal areas, and provide a more structured growth experience for the singer. 

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