



Research Report

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Singing as a Life-Long Educational Endeavor: Research Bridging the Divide from Childhood to Adulthood

by Bryan E. Nichols

Recent reports in the press suggest that overall, people sing very well, with some suggesting everyone can sing¹ and others suggesting some practice helps, too.² Regarding the latter, the two variables of experience and instruction are difficult to parse, but they are important: schoolchildren who sing at school each year tend to sing more in tune across the elementary years, while adolescents and adults who lapse in their singing indicate lower levels of tunefulness.³ However, what has been commonly referred to as singing accuracy is a narrow definition in the research literature: precisely how in tune one can sing is only one factor in the construct of singing. Yes, everyone can sing, though the current research tells us mostly about the degree of tunefulness—even to the tiniest degree—not whether people can “sing” beautifully.

Music in the media has an influence on students and offers impli-

cations for our singers in schools, colleges, churches, and community choirs. Naturally, what teachers and conductors offer and what students want can differ in classrooms of all subject areas. Choir, however, is a “subject” where students’ knowledge base is already rich and diverse. Children hear music everywhere, memorize lyrics, sing and rap for one another, and dance to music. In American schools, music is generally elective after the transition from childhood to adolescence, and teachers/conductors who consider themselves “passionate” about the subject can be presumed to want their students to continue singing throughout the lifespan. But what outcomes are important for children in general music, choir or other ensembles to encourage singing throughout their lives?

A starting point is honest instruction, like exists in math and English, and support and encouragement to continue in elective coursework.

Conductors for singers of all ages must give accurate and constructive feedback which helps the student accomplish two things: 1) improve weaknesses, and 2) improve strengths. Children and adolescents must be asked to sing individually or in small groups to develop the ability—and the confidence—to sing alone and with others. When they do, they are deserving of effective, supportive “feedbacks” that improve their singing. When constructive feedback is balanced offered alongside the notion that anyone can learn to do it—just like in math and other subject areas—singers may be more inclined to continue participation into college and community choir years.

What Does it Matter if Everyone Can Sing if No One Wants to?

An emphasis on being in tune can be detrimental to the idea

that everyone should enjoy singing when it suggests only “really good” singers should do it. This idea is at odds with the idea of teaching and learning: to learn it you must not have known it before. Anecdotal evidence suggests westerners have the notion that only those deemed good singers should sing, but other cultures value singing whether it is deemed technically “good” or not.⁴ Indeed, our mainstream culture is a listener culture with a dividing line between the stage and the audience, and this rings true (pun intended) for classical and pop music alike. When artists like Brandi Carlisle sing with

an orchestra, they sometimes invite the audience to participate; she leads them in not one but in two or even three parts. Audience members like to sing—and can, which is often proven when they are invited to do it as part of a big crowd.


There is a great threshold in the transition between school-aged years and adulthood. Researchers in music participation are now writing about how to lead in the twenty-first century, represented by two major ideas. First, what kinds of music practices encourage students to be capable readers and performers of music after school-

ing ends and there is no conductor around to help? We might think seriously about when music reading is important in students’ futures (it is!), and when is it a hindrance. Secondly, there is a great pop music movement in the schools our singers attend, sometimes called the modern band movement, where music teachers are helping students to learn solo instruments like ukulele, guitar, and other instruments. Maybe we can introduce tablature or the keys of the piano and at the same time make singing a priority too.

Of course, the transition from high school to adulthood is a time of active decision making for individuals. Regardless of their intended major, some research suggests students make the choice to participate in collegiate music ensembles well before they arrive on campus.⁵ In another study, college participants saw themselves as better singers than those who chose not to participate in college, and some of them cited a general lack of information about musical opportunities on campus.⁶ Importantly, some students may not have thought they were good enough to sing in college choir, which is unfortunate: students still have to take math and English perhaps wondering whether they are good enough.

Nothing Feels Good like Singing Feels Good

There is a great deal of research on non-musical outcomes related to singing. Generally, taking music is associated with good grades, it



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offers links to being healthier, and it promotes social activity for people of all ages. For individuals with dementia, it means connecting to certain memories when others have disappeared. There is less research, though, on this aspect of singing: evidence of feeling good while singing. It feels great to take a deep breath of air and sing it back out. I contend it feels particularly good to sing loudly, whether on your own or by participating in a choir.


Little is known about how people participate simultaneously in different kinds of music-making, or even about how people with music training of any kind go on to be consumers of music.⁷ Gates put forth that there are professionals and apprentices, and also amateurs, hobbyists, recreationalists, and dabblers,⁸ and he was always suggesting everyone is musical. The more conductors promote that everyone is musical (not just choristers) in the same way we can all write, read, and do math, the more students may seem themselves doing musical activities as a part of their future selves.

Conductors may agree the ability to sing in tune is important, followed closely by the ability to sing out with tone that matches the genre. If life-long music-making is a chief goal of conductors, the “curriculum” might include teaching students about their individual ranges so they can identify songs that suit them or know in which keys to sing them. How to find a starting pitch, and even knowing on which pitch one is beginning, might be considered primary goals for singing in choir that could lead

to individual music making. This could be an important reason for introducing students to the keyboard: to be able to find one’s way around the piano keys, whether virtual or physical.

Finally, a large repertoire of songs may not be a sufficient curriculum agenda for younger or older children to promote continuing participation in music, even in singing. Learning folk songs from our culture and others, as well as patriotic or parochial music—for schools that deem it important—are worthy goals, but they must be paralleled by developing the ability to: 1) sing in tune, 2) find starting notes and suitable ranges for one’s own voice, and 3) invent harmony to sing along with others. Singing is a noble activity, and we conductors are the gatekeepers to elective participation in secondary schooling and beyond.

A Final “Note” (or Text Box)

Christopher Small thought of music not as a thing, but an activity.⁹ To repeat, everyone can sing, and everyone should. What they used to call a “tin ear” is really a misconception: experience and instruction help us all to enjoy singing with our friends—the louder the better. 

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NOTES

- ¹ Malia Wolan, “How to Sing in Tune,” *New York Times Magazine* (Feb. 26, 2020).
- ² Dua Eldeib, “Study: Singing More of a Learned Skill than Natural talent,” *Chicago Tribune* (Feb. 18, 2015).
- ³ Steven Demorest and Peter Pfordresher, “Singing Accuracy Development from K-Adult,” *Music Perception* 32 (2015): 293-302.
- ⁴ Personal correspondence.
- ⁵ J. Bradley McDavid, *A Study of Factors Influencing Nonparticipation in Collegiate Band Programs among First-Year Students in the Pacific-10 Athletic Conference*. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Washington (1999).
- ⁶ Bret Amundson, *Factors Related to Continued Choral Participation: A comparative study of participants and non-participants in college choir*. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Washington (2012).
- ⁷ Bryan Nichols, “The Musical Participation and Consumerism of Two Non-Music Majors Enrolled in a University Men’s Glee Club,” *Contributions to Music Education* 40 (2015): 131-146.
- ⁸ J. Terry Gates, “Music Participation: Theory, research, and policy,” *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* 109 (1991): 1-35.
- ⁹ Christopher Small, *Musicking*, Wesleyan University Press (1998).