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Voices in your Head: A Method for Teaching Audiation in the Secondary Choral Classroom

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In the musical *The Music Man,* con man Professor Harold Hill arrives in the quaint town of River City, Iowa, to swindle the unsuspecting townspeople. Equipped with his instructional method, the Think System, Professor Hill asks his students to practice by simply thinking the Minuet in G with no need to "bother with notes."[1] Imagine how easy our jobs would be if teaching music were only that simple. While the "think system" does not work, the method of audiation is a fundamental part of a student's musical development.

Audiation, or as Kodály teachers refer to it, inner hearing, is a pedagogical technique in which performers internalize the sound of the music in their heads without actually creating any sound. The term audiation, most notably disseminated by Edwin Gordon in his book *Music Learning Theory,* is most commonly implemented at the elementary level.[2] Although audiation is initially developed at a younger age, we as directors should continue to foster its development throughout a student's entire musical journey.

In the Texas public schools, audiation has become a popular tool in the sight-singing room at UIL contests. This is due in part to the contest rules that do not allow students or teachers to sing during the study period before actually sight reading. As a result, directors employ audiation to legally work on pitch patterns during the study time. Other states, such as California and Florida, incorporate similar sight-singing rules, and in North Carolina, students are only allowed to audiate during the study time.

Although directors incorporate audiation in rehearsals, like Harold Hill, the purpose and assimilation of this teaching method is not always properly implemented. I believe we as teachers either ignore its purpose or neglect to methodically develop this truly important skill.

Previously, in my own teaching, I dismissed the process of audiation because I did not fully understand its purpose. I viewed it as a tool for the sight-singing room at contest, not a process/technique to be used in my rehearsals. Like Harold Hill, I did not instruct my students in a proper sequence that promoted good learning.

The fundamental purpose of audiation, according to Gordon, is to silently hear music in one's head before, during, or after it is heard or performed and to give it meaning.

One important aspect of audiation during vocal production is the singers' ability to internalize their desired sound before actually producing it. You might be familiar with the phrase "think, breathe, sing." In this saying the "think" is audiation. Kodály expert Lois Choksy posits, "Of all musical skills, inner hearing is perhaps the most important. One cannot produce a musical sound without first thinking that sound."

Many times we as directors may resort to correcting a

musical flaw through a complex set of technical exercises when the underlying issue was that the singers failed to successfully internalize the desired sound.

Sequential Audiation Instruction

Audiation is not an inherent talent but a skill that can be developed through practice and guided instruction. While many students may already be highly skilled in audiation, others need guidance and support. The following is a suggested method for implementing audiation in rehearsal. It is strongly advised that students continue to use Curwen hand signs (when appropriate) and to shape their mouths as if they were still producing the sound.

Audiation Development throughout the Rehearsal

1) Vocal Exercises

- Throughout a standard vocal exercise, instruct students to audiate specific pitches. For example, on a five-note descending scale, instruct students to audiate So and Re. Frequently change the audiated pitches in order to maintain student focus and interest.

- The director displays three Curwen solfège hand signs. Students sing the initial three pitches while the teacher simultaneously provides the next three hand signs. This exercise requires students to internalize future pitches while concurrently maintaining the sung pitch.

- The director sings pitches using a neutral vowel. Students must sing pitches back but on the correct solfège syllable. In this exercise, students must demonstrate auditory comprehension of the relationship between pitch and solfege. You might be surprised by how difficult this exercise can be for even the most advanced students.

2) After stopping for corrections in rehearsal, return to the measure where you want to begin without playing the pitches. Then ask students to first think (audiate) their starting pitches and then cue them to sing.

3) For the younger singer, Choksy uses an exercise called "hiding the song." Students begin by singing a familiar melody. At the teacher's signal, the students continue the song but audiate silently. Again the teacher signals, and the students return to singing out loud.

4) Notate a familiar song on the board in either standard notation or by displaying Curwen solfège hand signs. Students audiate the song while attempting to recognize the tune. Examples of introductory songs include *Mary Had a Little Lamb, Silent Night,* and *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.*

5) During the rehearsal of literature and while working with only one section, instruct the other section(s) to audiate their parts. This helps keep all students engaged in the lesson.

Audiation in Sight-Singing

The use of audiation in sight-singing can be extremely beneficial; however, many times a director's instruction to students is the following: "Audiate the entire exercise, ready, begin." This type of repetitive instruction is not effective in the development of a student's ability to audiate. Additionally, the director cannot assess whether or not students are audiating correct pitches. While their Curwen hand signs might be correct, we cannot read their minds. It is much more practical to consider the following audiation instructional sequence as you sight-sing with your choirs.

The purpose of the following pedagogical sequence is to provide support for students when audiating while maintaining pitch and rhythmic accuracy. As you introduce these strategies to your ensemble, be aware that the students may initially find it difficult to alternate between singing and audiating.

- Develop individual sight-singing ability. It is extremely difficult for students to audiate if they cannot sight sing on their own.

- Audiate an entire exercise with a piano playing the part(s).

- Rows one and three sing while rows two and four audiate (Alternate groups every measure or as teacher desires).

- Sing every other measure while audiating the silent measures.

- Alternate singing and audiating between parts. For example, altos audiate while sopranos sing their part. Pick a random spot in the exercise to have them switch.

• Sing only beats one and three in each measure.

• Sing only beat one in each measure.

• Audiate the entire exercise while the teacher plays only beat one of each measure on the piano.

• Sing every Do (You may also include Mi and So) only. This helps to maintain pitch center.

• Sing only the first note of each page or stop randomly and ask students to sing the pitch where the director stopped.

• Audiate an entire sight-singing exercise from beginning to end.

Potential Audiation Challenges

While audiation is a useful and important tool, there are challenges to consider before implementing it in your sight-singing curriculum. Since audiation is an individual practice technique, individuals' sight-singing skills must be developed.

A 1994 study by Michele Henry and Steven Demorest individually tested students' sight singing ability. Enlisting the help of students from two Texas choir programs with outstanding contest scores in sight singing, they discovered that when tested individually, students averaged a score of 9.87 out of a possible 15. This translates into a 66% accuracy rating.

While students can sing accurately in a large group, many are following the vocal leaders in their section. This means audiation may be a challenge for those singers who are not confident when sight singing individually.

In addition, depending on your state's contest rules, it may be risky to use audiation with your choir. There is always a chance that a student may forget and begin singing out loud during the required quiet study time. If you plan to use audiation at contest, be sure to stop and follow correct contest procedures at least one month before the contest in order to avoid accidental disqualification.

Conclusions

Audiation remains one of the most valuable aspects of a musician's development. The ability to connect meaning to what is heard or performed remains at the root of all musical ability. It allows people to compose, improvise, perform, and appreciate music. As we progress as choral directors, it is important to leave the Harold Hill mentality of audiation behind and begin to incorporate sequential audiation instruction.

NOTES

[1] Meredith Wilson, *The Music Man* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1958), 113.

[2] Edwin Gordon, *Learning Sequences in Music: A Contemporary Music Learning Theory* (Chicago: GIA, 2012).

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Keeping Ourselves Honest: Are We Fully Prepared for Rehearsal?

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As a conductor, I feel the most important work I do happens outside the rehearsal room. It is selecting appropriate literature and preparing to present that literature to the ensemble.

If I have done my homework wisely, the rehearsal process becomes much easier. Our singers entrust us choral directors with their most valuable resource—their time. To use the ensemble's time wisely, it is imperative that we come to rehearsal with a thorough knowledge and understanding of each score. Despite its importance, score study is one aspect of the job I believe many of us, I include myself, fail to always find adequate time for.

I developed the following checklist as a way to "keep myself honest" during the process of score study and to help evaluate whether or not I am fully prepared for a rehearsal. While it is certainly not exhaustive, I hope you find it to be a useful resource in your rehearsal preparation.