

Asking Facebook Colleagues What Enhances Choral Sound – A Pilot Study

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Introduction

From year to year, many choral conductors have their choir participate in festivals, district assessments, and other adjudications in an effort to receive feedback on what can be improved in their choral ensemble. Often, the conductor receives notes that will benefit the group, and sometimes students receive feedback from adjudicators that their choral conductor alluded to previously. The benefit of attending these events for the students and the choral conductor is having the opportunity to receive feedback from someone who doesn't normally hear the group and having the opportunity to listen to other choral groups from the area or district. After attending these choral events, students have conversations about the choral groups that performed. They tend to ask the question, "How does that choir create such an amazing choral sound?" Or after reviewing feedback from adjudicators, many singers try to take the notes offered to help improve their next performance.

During the school year, conductors introduce many methods and approaches to help their students recognize the importance of proper singing technique and singing together as a group. These approaches can be presented through warm-ups, the repertoire chosen, or by listening to other high-quality performing ensembles. But the question is, what does choral and vocal pedagogy look and feel like, in action, in the classroom? What are we choral directors doing to enhance the sound of their choir and help our singers grow?

Available literature indicates that choral conductors' ideas (and singers' ideas) about a "great sounding choir" can vary depending on the perspectives of those individuals. Neuen (1988) considers a great sounding choir to be one that uses energy, which includes buoyancy, deliberately formed vowel sounds, proper placement, and vocal control.¹

In Lamble's *Handbook for Beginning Choral Educators*, the author asked eleven participants to describe the tone quality they felt was appropriate for a high school choir. Some of the responses included:

- Having the ability to sing with "cleanliness," intonation, matched vowels, and a moderately mature tone.
- Having a naturally sounding vocal production with good resonance and breath support.
- Being open and free, natural and easy, supported and energized, flowing, focused and directed, and more vertically than laterally.
- And being well blended, including dynamic color and variety.²

Though none of the responses by Lamble or Neuen are wrong, it is up to the choral conductor to make sure that his or her students are capable of identifying a great choral sound when they hear it and how they can achieve that sound within their choral group. I do believe that it takes good planning, creativity, the right tools, and hard work to achieve great choral sound with our choirs.³

Pilot Study

In order to receive feedback from choral conductors currently in the field, a Facebook post compiled by choral colleagues was created (a closed group) asking the question, "What do you consider important characteristics of a great sounding choir?" Responses included:

- Diction
- Tall, round vowels
- Clean, balanced sound across the whole choir
- Engaged singing
- Varied and appropriate sound for different and interesting literature

- Pure, clear tone, unified vowels, and crisp consonants when appropriate
- Appropriate tone for age of the individuals
- Intonation, rhythm, phrasing, vowels, dynamics, diction, and energy
- Relaxed vowels, ending consonants together, understanding the text, and supported tones that blend
- Properly shaped mouths
- Vibrant, healthy (not forced), and balanced tone from top to bottom
- Vocally healthy, unified vowels, beauty of sound, and appropriate tone colors
- Good intonation
- Unified vowels and a great understanding of dynamics
- Vitality/energy
- Tuneful, informed, and expressive singing
- Harmony (singing in tune with one another)
- The release of tension and complete freedom and movement causing singers' bodies to be engaged in the music
- Vowels, diction, and blend
- Pure, precise, clear, tall, and finely-tuned vowels
- Crisp, fast, articulate consonants

Based on the responses given, characteristics such as the importance of vowel unification, diction, and the use of energy and expression seemed to be recurring characteristics throughout the post. Even though these three characteristics are not the only areas to help improve a choral sound, literature can be found detailing how choral conductors employ these characteristics to enhance their choral group.

Vowel Unification

Whether singing as a soloist or as a part of a choral group, singers should understand the importance of the vowel that carries out the musical line. When a group of singers comes together, whether it be two or twenty-two or more, it is important that each person in the group be capable of matching not only the pitch but the vowel at any given time.

The vowel sound being produced is determined by three factors: the lips, the jaw, and the tongue.⁴ Farrell believes that a demonstration of the vowel sound for the singers can be helpful in unifying the vowel. Providing phonetic symbols can also be beneficial. By providing visual cues like [i] with the word, feet, written beneath the IPA symbol, your students will get an idea of the sound you are looking for with that particular vowel.⁵

Choral conductors may come across bright, spread, or dark vowels within their choral ensemble. This can cause pitches to become sharp or flat. Other problems may arise, all relating to vowel formation.

For issues with bright vowels, incorporating vocal exercises that allow more jaw space and relaxation are helpful. With dark vowels, the sound produced would be considered too far in the back of the mouth. Creating a more forward sensation such as the use of frontal consonants (*z, n, m, th*) in front of a vowel will aid in solving this problem. With spread vowels, many choral conductors demonstrate the vowel shape and have the students reproduce them correctly.⁶

Diction

Diction exercises are used to help teach vocal tract freedom, word pronunciation, and consonant articulation.⁷ Besides making the text of a choral work understandable, diction also helps in creating a clear choral tone and developing clean and crisp consonants. In choral warm-ups, Jordan believes that the following consonants should be used:

- d (point the tongue toward the ridge of the upper teeth)
- n (useful for developing legato)
- v (useful for building resonance and controlled airstream).⁸

To help with word pronunciation, Phillips's curriculum includes the use of exercises such as tongue twisters and hissing sibilants (*s, sh, c*) to build better diction.⁹ For consonant

articulation, using voiceless (*p, t, k, ch*) and voiced (*b, d, g, j*) plosives along with tuned (*m, n*) and voiced (*v, z, th, zh*) continuants are found to be beneficial in developing excellent diction.¹⁰

Expressivity—Energy and Excitement

Over the past eight years of teaching, I have found that encouraging singers to sing with energy and excitement can be one of the most difficult tasks even when the work builds its own momentum. In a work that has a slow tempo, the singers often don't understand that energy and excitement can still be used to enhance the sound.

To help create energy and excitement, I use acting or storytelling. By having students take away the music and speak the text as a monologue or conversation, they tend to find underlying meaning while also identifying the highs and lows that make for a more powerful and energized performance. When the students have finally understood this technique, asking them to go back and sing with the same emotion they demonstrated in their monologue or conversation adds that hint of energy and excitement that makes a work even more expressive.

Also, to help with energy and excitement, choral conductors and their students should also consider looking at articulation, dynamics, and phrasing (mentioned in Table 1) since these elements also help build feeling and emotion.

Conclusion

With literature and suggestions from current choral conductors, the ideas in this article may serve as a reminder for all choral conductors and students of characteristics to watch for in choral rehearsals. Though each conductor has had different training and preparation, it is important to share our ideas, methods, and strategies with colleagues and their singers in an effort to have our ensembles grow significantly, both musically and vocally. As a tool, Table 1 on pages 17-18 provides information concerning what choral conductors can look for to enhance choral sound and approaches they can take in achieving that sound.

NOTES

- ¹ Donald L. Neuen, "The Sound of a Great Choir," *Music Educators Journal* 75, no. 4 (1988), 44.
- ² Walter Lamble, *Handbook for Beginning Choral Educators* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), accessed June 1, 2018, ProQuest Ebook Central, 28.
- ³ Paul Nesheim & Weston Noble, *Building Beautiful Voices: Singers Edition* (Dayton, Ohio: Roger Dean Publishing Company, 1995), 2.
- ⁴ Kyle J. Weary, "Vocal pedagogy in the choral rehearsal: becoming a vocal technician," *Choral Director* 8: no. 1 (2011), 23.
- ⁵ Frances Farrell, "An iconic approach to vocal technique for the teenage chorister," *Musician Educateur Au Canada* 51, no. 4 (2010), 46.
- ⁶ Lynn Corbin, "Practical applications of vocal pedagogy for choral ensembles," *Choral Journal* 26, no. 8 (1986), 7.
- ⁷ Patrice Ward-Steinman, *Becoming a Choral Music Teacher: A Field Experience Workbook* (New York: Routledge, 2018), accessed June 12, 2018, ProQuest Ebook Central, 44.
- ⁸ James Jordan, *The Choral Warm-Up: Method, Procedures, Planning, and Core Vocal Exercises* (Chicago: GIA, 2005), 50.
- ⁹ Kenneth H. Phillips, *Teaching Kids to Sing* (New York: Schirmer, 1992), 51.
- ¹⁰ Patrice Ward-Steinman, *Becoming a Choral Music Teacher* (New York: Routledge, 2018), accessed June 12, 2018, ProQuest Ebook Central.

Table 1: Checklist for Enhancing the Choral Sound

Appropriate Sound

The sound produced by any choral group should represent the age of the singers and the style of music being performed. A high school choral group may be able to pull off singing selections from Handel's *Messiah*, but the overall sound may be different than that of a university choral group. The choral conductor must also make sure that the sound created is stylistically appropriate for the repertoire being performed.

Articulation

Often, singers consider the term articulation in the same manner as they do diction. With articulation, terms such as tenuto (to hold the note for its full value), *staccato* (short and detached), or marcato (to strongly emphasize the note) can change the way a word or phrase is sung. These choices are often noted by the composer but can be added by the conductor. A clear understanding and demonstration of each articulation marking is helpful in unifying the appropriate articulation needed in each choral work. Articulation markings must also match mood and be stylistically appropriate for the given repertoire.

Balance

In a choral ensemble, the dynamic level for one section may not be the same for the other singers. To achieve a well-balanced choir, each section of the group should find a dynamic level that is appropriate to the remaining sections. This can be an issue, especially in many grade-level choruses where there is a small representation of male voices. The male voices must then find a dynamic level that matches the dynamic level of the female voice parts and balances out the entire ensemble.

Blend

A well-blended chorus is one that has balance and like tone quality. This consists of making sure each voice part is singing with appropriate dynamic levels and listening carefully to match tone color, which comes from the use of unified vowels and consonants.

Breathing

The breath plays an important role in singing. It initiates the sound of the voices. In choral singing, it is important that each section breathe together and finish musical phrases together before taking another breath. For repertoire with long musical phrases, the choral conductor may recommend that the choir stagger the breathing in order to keep the musical line from being broken. All singers must pay close attention to how much breath is being expended. They must make sure that their breath intake is enough to get to the end of the phrases.

Diction

Diction consists not only of articulated consonants but also properly formed vowels. Consonants should be articulated at the same time with accuracy. This calls for the director telling the singers exactly where the consonants will be placed within a rhythmic pattern.

Table 1: Checklist for Enhancing the Choral Sound (continued)

Dynamics

In recent publications of choral music, composers are providing dynamic markings in their repertoire. Though these markings are helpful, conductors should include dynamics that tell the story of each work. Knowing when to emphasize a particular section or back away can be important in the portrayal of any work.

Harmony

Harmony can become increasingly difficult as students continue to sing in the choir due to the changes in difficulty of the repertoire. That is why we often find our colleagues using less sophisticated songs in elementary and middle school classrooms to help build this skill. When working on harmony, it is important that each section of the choir not only know its part but be able to sing it with other sections correctly. It is also important to remember that harmony stands on its own; however, melody should not be buried by other elements.

Phrasing

In any form of music, whether choral or instrumental, phrasing is important. No one wants to hear a choir perform Mozart's *Ave Verum Corpus* in a choppy manner. Good phrasing occurs when a choir can push and pull a musical line in a manner that creates a special sense of feeling within the music. Dynamics and articulation play a major role in determining the phrasing of a work.

Resonance

There is nothing more rewarding than hearing a choir with a rich, deep, full sound filling a room. This is resonance. In a choral group, all members must work together to effectively demonstrate a well resonant sound since voices can stick out if pushed. Not every choral work will call for a rich, deep, and full resonant sound. The choral conductor must be able to demonstrate and guide students in producing a resonant sound suitable for each work.

Rhythm

Rhythmic patterns tend to be challenging for many choral singers, especially students who have a limited knowledge of music theory. To help with learning precise rhythm patterns, conductors working with younger singers often have students clap the rhythms back to them. Conductors of older singers may have their students speak the words in rhythm or count sing before adding the text. Methods such as these help align rhythms, especially for more difficult passages. Also, having the choir recognize the underlying beat will help maintain a steady pulse rather than slow down or speed up.

Tension

We are not speaking of the tension found in building phrases. We mean tension that can build up in the bodies of singers. Choral conductors should be aware of any signs of tension in their singers since tension can hinder the healthy production of sound. To help eliminate tension, students should frequently check their posture and employ appropriate (good) breath support to minimize muscle strain, especially around the larynx and pharynx.