

Teaching Healthy Singing in the Choral and Applied Studio

Part One: The Pedagogues' Teachings

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Introduction

In vocal music programs, voice majors are required to participate in a choral ensemble and an applied studio lesson as part of their degree completion. While a student may work with multiple singing instructors during his/her studies, each student may come across numerous methods or approaches to developing healthy singing habits. Researchers have found that “misunderstandings can occur when the singer’s understanding of specific terms or phrases do not match the voice instructor’s or choral conductor’s concept.”¹ To help expand the literature available for choral and applied voice instructors, a study to determine what approaches pedagogues of singing considered useful in developing healthy young singers was conducted. In this study, the term healthy singing is defined as the ability to produce musical sounds with the voice that incorporate the use of correct posture, proper breath support, full tone quality, evenness moving between vocal registers, and good intonation combined with the singer’s natural talent.

Materials and Method

To determine how choral and applied voice pedagogues define healthy singing and work toward developing healthy singers, a qualitative approach was used. The participants consisted of three choral and three applied voice pedagogues. They were selected from a purposeful sample of pedagogues in higher education, along with one student of

the pedagogue participants from each institution. Interviews with the pedagogues served as the primary sources of data collection, supported by observations of choral and applied studio instruction and student interviews.

Results

While the choral rehearsal focuses on group vocal instruction and the applied voice studio on one-on-one instruction, understanding the methods used by current pedagogues allows instructors of vocal music to examine their teachings and the opportunity to see what approaches may be used in creating healthy young singers.

Case 1: Emily (Choral Pedagogue)

Emily considers the warm-up vital in ensuring healthy singing in her choral rehearsal. Completing warm-ups that are “nice, easy, *legato* exercises” provides the “opportunity to focus on the vocalism” and “helps the intonation.” While not having a wide variety of warm-ups, Emily has eight vocal exercises that she alters from day to day, making sure that the “focus [is] on technique and not having to learn something new.”

Beginning with the middle range of the voice, Emily starts her rehearsals with a three-note scale on a voiced consonant. This exercise serves as preparation for the vocal folds to adjust from the daily speaking voice to singing. While keeping the beginning exercise limited, it allows the students to

listen to each other without the complexity of vowels and get in touch with the breath. Taking the exercises and building among them, Emily typically moves to a sustained pitch that allows focusing on the vowel, matching pitch, intonation, and listening. Once the warm-up process is complete, the students will have covered a majority of the approaches Emily would take in correcting techniques throughout the repertoire. This allows the students to have a reference point on how to fix issues such as intonation, dynamics, vowel formation, and approaching notes in different registers. While the exercises presented here are a small portion of what Emily includes in building a healthy singer, this has helped strengthen the rehearsal process.

Case 2: Ryan (Choral Pedagogue)

Ryan describes healthy singing to his students as having “as little tension as possible.” While a significant amount of time is not spent on discussing posture, Ryan makes his students aware of their posture, identifying areas of tension, and working to eliminate this sensation as much as possible.

Determined to have a sound that is “quite open,” Ryan challenges his choir “to sing with enough depth, enough openness, and enough breath support to have a lively sound without forcing it.” The choir may be asked to alter the shape of its vowels or by completing exercises such as panting, yawning, sighing, or sirens to help achieve the sound desired. When teaching resonance, Ryan says that keeping the mouth arched open, tongue out of the way, and back of the throat open allows for space inside the mouth and opportunities for shaping the vowel. While Ryan may use various analogies to help his students understand the sound wanted, a good amount of the work comes through “emulation.”

Case 3: Tommy (Choral Pedagogue)

Tommy considers a student with a “free vocal sound” to be a healthy sound. He also thinks of a healthy singer as “someone who understands where his/her core sound is, sings there, and then builds vocal expansion from there.” During performances, Tommy can identify the “relative vocal health” of his students through listening while identifying tension issues based on their posture. Although posture is not a topic that is discussed often during his choral rehearsal, Tommy’s strategy for teaching proper posture is through his conducting stance. He believes singers should imitate his stance.

Tommy also mentions the importance of the vowel when

singing, considering it to be an essential part of resonance. Tommy will remove text during the beginning stages of the learning of repertoire to help students build a unified, clear, and strong resonant sound. He also has his students think of each vowel as a different instrument, saying things like “this [vowel] is a French horn, that one is an oboe. You have to be very careful when you’re changing vowels; it’s like becoming another instrument.”

Case 4: David (Applied Voice Pedagogue)

David considers proper breath support and postural alignment essential components of healthy singing. Building on these two aspects, David says that a healthy singer is one with “a nice free tone with vibrato.” To help his students recognize the importance of a good expanded breath, David has his students lie on the floor, asking them to breath naturally. When the breath is natural, the ribcage does not move, and the bones are quiet, causing the belly to go up and down during inhalation and exhalation. Reminding his students that breath should remain the same when singing, David may include exercises such as singing a sustained pitch, such as [zi] or [si], focusing on the steady flow of breath.

When considering posture, David thinks of alignment as “nose to chin to sternum to belly button.”

The practice session is to remind students to maintain a straight line from their head to the abdomen. Many of us have terrible posture. Shoulders are collapsed. The head is sometimes tilted to either the right or the left. We slouch from one knee to the other. ‘Top to bottom,’ ‘straight line,’ alignment reduces this tendency to lock the body with tension. That, coupled with the practice of reminding the student about aligning the back of the head to the spine, hinders the tendency for lifting the chin. Such action bunches the back of the nape, creating tension around the larynx. Over tucking the chin downward constricts and chokes laryngeal movement. This ‘back of the head to the spine,’ line also enables the singer to keep his/her head over the shoulders without the head jutting forward over the torso.

Through the use of analogies and demonstrations, like those described by David, students can limit the amount of tension that may impact a healthy sound.

Case 5: Lucinda (*Applied Voice Pedagogue*)

Lucinda believes that a healthy singer has “a healthy tone, free of tension, and free of nasality.” While voice instructors may have their own desired sound, Lucinda prefers a “clear and warm” tone. To help in the development process, Lucinda uses *The Estelle Liebling Vocal Course* (1981) textbook because it incorporates exercises focusing on intonation and breath support through *legato* singing, agility, sustained tone, and head voice and the *messa di voce*.

While the textbook may assist in a portion of the development process, Lucinda also uses analogies and demonstrations when teaching healthy vocal technique. When discussing proper posture, Lucinda uses the analogy of visualizing yourself as a book with a nice spine down the middle and the shoulders back similar to the pages of a book to help “lengthen the spine.” Lucinda is also a pedagogue that avoids mechanics when teaching breath support to first-year students since they may become overwhelmed with the physiology. When teaching breath support, Lucinda has the students think of a “slow leak in the tire,” which requires the singer to sustain a hiss while trying to not release too quickly. The air is moving. This exercise allows the singer to feel the ribcage and the diaphragm’s function during the breathing process. While these are a couple of the exercises used during Lucinda’s voice lessons, most of the techniques come from her experiences as a student in the voice studio.

Case 6: Jesse (*Applied Voice Pedagogue*)

Jesse believes that healthy singing consists of an individual who uses his/her instrument correctly by singing consciously with “*legato* on the breath.” Jesse describes conscious singing as “not simply relying on talent,” but “those students who have taken time to understand how to play the instrument no matter what the style is.” Teaching what he calls “registration singing” calls for the student to sing through the *passagio* with “nice, fluid, smooth transition.”

To be successful with registration, vowel modification and proper breath support should be included in lessons. Encouraging his students to have an “open throat” and “relaxed pharyngeal wall” helps in producing the sound Jesse desires and can be created with a “freely, floating larynx.” To help his students better understand the sound desired, Jesse will often demonstrate and use other exercises as necessary.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the six pedagogues’ approach to teaching healthy singing in their choral and applied voice studio settings. By analyzing the data provided, seven major themes emerged: background and training, healthy singing and techniques, student abilities, repertoire choices, rapport, the structure of lessons/rehearsals, and agreements/disagreements among students and pedagogues. The second theme, healthy singing and techniques, will be reviewed since it looks at how the pedagogues define healthy singing and how they teach vocal technique during their rehearsals and studio lessons.

While each of the pedagogues used multiple approaches in teaching healthy singing in their choral rehearsals and studio lessons, the use of analogies, imagery, and demonstration was thought to be most appropriate in the learning process by the author. The analogies used by pedagogues such as David and Lucinda were found to help the students comprehend what was asked of them rather than overwhelm them with technical terms.

In the descriptions provided by the pedagogues, each participant highlighted aspects of vocal technique suitable for developing a healthy singer. Posture, breath support, and tone quality were mentioned the most and found to be of importance in the beginning stages of developing a young, healthy singer.

- Posture. While the pedagogues may not spend much time on posture during rehearsals or studio lessons, participants such as Ryan, Tommy, and Lucinda note the importance of eliminating as much tension as possible. Two choral pedagogues, Emily and Ryan, find themselves completing exercises such as stretching and back rubs to help the singers recognize good body alignment to release tension.

For Tommy, it is hoped that his choral students understand and can reproduce proper posture as it is shown through his conducting stance. In the applied studio, David and Lucinda mention the importance of “lengthening the spine,” or keeping a line from the “back of the head to the spine,” that not only eliminates muscle tension but provides a proper stance needed for singing. While the choral pedagogues use physical demonstration or modeling to teach posture, it is interesting to note that the applied voice pedagogues use imagery to explain the same technique.

• **Breath support:** While the pedagogues note the importance of breath support, David and Lucinda provide a detailed description of an exercise used in their applied studios to help with the breath. While Lucinda’s “slow leak in the tire” and David’s “lie on the floor” exercise focuses on the breath, neither exercise is combined with the act of singing. The two pedagogues believe that these exercises help the singer recognize the movement involved around the ribcage during the process of inhalation and exhalation. Using a hum or a vowel on a sustained pitch will encourage the singers to connect to the steady stream of air being used.

• **Tone quality:** While pedagogues may have their own ideal tone, they mention different aspects that may play a part in a choral or individual singer’s tone quality. To achieve the desired tone, the pedagogues in this study use vowel modification, various descriptors, or modeling based on the repertoire or exercises being performed. For choral pedagogues, Tommy, Ryan, Emily, and applied voice pedagogue Jesse, they tend to focus on vowel modification when achieving the tone quality wanted. For applied voice pedagogue Lucinda, she prefers a “warm” sound and uses descriptors like this when describing what she wants from her students. It is interesting to note that the choral pedagogues focus on vowel modification when achieving the desired tone. This may be due to them working with multiple singers at one time and attempting to match the overall sound of the ensemble.

Conclusion

While singing pedagogues may use multiple approaches of teaching in their applied studios or choral rehearsals, performers and educators of singing should share the techniques that they find helpful in developing a healthy singer. Though the pedagogue’s definitions of healthy singing may vary, the study shows that:

- posture whether presented through modeling or imagery is an area that is beneficial to producing a healthy sound;
- effective or efficient breath support requires that the breath remain natural; and
- the pedagogues may have their personal choice of tone, vowel shaping, and the use of descriptors to make an impact on what is heard.

The research also shows that there are many techniques and approaches used by choral and applied voice pedagogues that should be shared, as they may be beneficial for all singing teachers and their students. For this reason, this is a call for singing instructors to join together as more overlap may be found among the choral and applied voice settings. ■

NOTES

- ¹ H. Apfelstadt, L. Robinson, & M. Taylor, “Building Bridges among Choral Conductors, Voice Teachers, and Students.” *Choral Journal*, 44 no. 2, (2003): 25-33.
- ² D.L. Thompson, “A Collaborative Approach: How Pedagogues of Singing and Their Students Navigate the Solo and Choral Realms” (Doctoral dissertation, 2019). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (13884375).