

# *Teaching Healthy Singing in the Choral and Applied Studio*

## *Part Two: The Students' Perspective*

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Part one of this two-part article looked at how choral and applied voice pedagogues defined and implemented healthy singing in their choral rehearsals and applied studio lessons. While the six pedagogues' definitions of healthy singing varied, the study showed that a focus on posture, breath support, and tone quality were three areas of importance in developing a young, healthy singer. The study also showed that using analogies, imagery, and modeling was the most common approach in teaching their students. This article looks at how the pedagogues' students defined healthy singing and which techniques were deemed useful in their choral and applied voice pedagogue's teaching methods.

### **Results**

To arrive at a definition of healthy singing, the students were asked to share their thoughts on five characteristics of good singing: correct posture, breath support, tone quality, vocal registration, and resonance. The students were then asked to share how their instructors taught these concepts during the choral rehearsal or applied studio lesson and how this has helped them in becoming a healthy singer.

#### *Case 1: Kaitlyn - Choral Student of Emily*

A healthy singer uses proper technique. All of these components, posture, breath support, plus knowing when to mix and knowing when to use the chest voice are important. They take care of their bodies. Also, knowing when not to sing.

Kaitlyn sings in Emily's mixed chorus, crediting this experience with how much she has learned about her voice and how to use it as an instrument. Through Emily's choral rehearsal, Kaitlyn has determined that proper posture sets you up so that you are able to keep your ribs open, and it helps the breath move efficiently. During the rehearsal, she recalls Emily asking the choir to sit on their "sitz bones" or alternate feet. This serves as a reminder for the students to sit tall. Once proper posture is produced, Kaitlyn believes that well-developed breath support will emerge along with excellent tone quality. For Kaitlyn, it is during the warm-up that Emily tends to discuss breath support. A favorite breathing exercise from the rehearsal is pretending that the choir is engaged in a tug-of-war with Emily. Students pull an imaginary rope while Emily tugs the other direction. Kaitlyn is not exactly sure how this exercise helps with the breath. She believes that this exercise really engages the breath.

Continuing to draw the connection with how proper posture sets up the breath, Kaitlyn is reminded of the breath's impact on tone. If you are not using your breath efficiently and you let air escape in your tone, you have un-vocalized air. That's not the tone quality you want. Remembering that Emily will have the choir focus on vowel shaping when achieving the desired sound, this may include making a [u] more rounded or a [ɑ] taller. With vocal registration and resonance, Kaitlyn recalls imagery to differentiate head and chest voice. This may include the thought of chocolates representing a rich chest sound.

### Case 2: Kimberly - Choral Student of Ryan

Kimberly is a non-music major who sings in Ryan's choral at the university. Feeling confident in her growth, Kimberly has noticed a change in how she manages her voice, including breath and volume control, by singing in the choir. With the musical experiences provided, Kimberly describes healthy singing as "having good breath support and making sure to have my soft palate lifted and not just pushing on my vocal cords. I think that having really good posture is a good foundation, starting with planting my feet then extending my ribcage. This allows for a deep breath. Then I can sing without strain."

For Kimberly, it is during the warm-up that healthy singing evolves. As Ryan incorporates movement and includes different syllables and articulation during the warm-ups, Kimberly benefits greatly. While she considers posture an essential aspect, the choir spends most of the rehearsal standing to help sustain proper posture modeled by Ryan in his conducting stance. When seated, Kimberly notes that Ryan will ask students to sit on the edge of the chairs to reduce the temptation to be somewhat lazy.

Kimberly notes that it is also during the warm-up that breath support is mentioned. While panting and yawning exercises may be completed to help focus on the breath, she recalls how Ryan will demonstrate proper breath support by breathing deeply and moving his hands downward to help visualize what a deep breath might look like.

Once students have become familiar with their repertoire, they begin to focus on tone quality. While sirens are one way of exploring tone quality, Kimberly acknowledges that the singers may sing in their throats. Then he has us essentially going through the spectrum, all the way to really nasally, bright sounds. This helps us explore the different tone quality types.

Kimberly also notes that siren exercises are often used to help in making a connection with vocal registration, noticing when the singers switch from head to chest voice. While the anatomy of the voice is not mentioned often, Kimberly recalls how Ryan may use lifting the soft palate and accessing the space in the singer's head when discussing resonance, along with mentioning the importance of vowel shaping.

### Case 3: Leslie - Choral Student of Tommy

According to Leslie, a healthy singer should be able to sing in multiple styles and create many different sounds while

still feeling relaxed and not strained. The breath is very important, and breathing properly is extremely important to healthy singing because it is the source of the sound. She also thinks that posture and how you hold your body are very important because they will reflect the sound that then comes out. "I think that as long as you have that foundation, that is really the core of what a healthy singer needs to be."

Leslie sings in Tommy's Chamber Choir at the university where she considers a significant growth has taken place along with applied studio lessons and performing in musicals. In her third semester of studies in Tommy's choir, Leslie has learned how to "manipulate" to achieve health tone and color and create a sound that blends with the other singers. While Leslie also studies applied voice with a different instructor, she finds that Tommy's approach to manipulating the sound is more metaphorical than her voice instructor who focuses on the anatomy of the voice and the use of imagery to adjust the sound.

Leslie finds that Tommy is often reminding the choir to sit in a standing position in order to remain tall. When this does not work, the choir stands. Believing that good posture leads to proper breath support, Leslie finds that Tommy does not explain breath support during the choral rehearsal. Leslie does mention that when the breath is not how Tommy would like it, he stops and asks the choir to make the changes that are necessary.

While realizing that many of the chorus members are music theater majors who usually sing with a bright sound, Leslie recognizes that Tommy will use the analogy of singing with a surprised German voice to obtain the darker, warmer tone quality desired. To help understand a particular sound, Leslie says Tommy will often model a specific word or vowel. Being accustomed to the saying, put it in your mask, when discussing resonance with musical theater, Leslie finds that Tommy will use the analogy from barbershop singing, which calls for a pure, very filtered sound that is clear and focused.

### Case 4: Skylar - Applied Voice Student of David

Skylar studies voice in David's applied studio. While also singing in the university choir, Skylar recognizes that her singing abilities have grown surprisingly quickly while studying with David. Through her studies, Skylar believes that a healthy singer is someone who does not push too hard. They focus on how they physically feel when they are singing, and they are able to articulate that. A healthy singer takes good

care of her/his voice and does not strain or push past personal limits. A healthy singer drinks a lot of water, takes good care of the body, and has good control over breathing techniques.

While Skylar may not have the best posture, David will often remind her to keep her shoulders back and keep the head at eye level, which will help produce good posture. When Skylar's stance is not correct, she notices that her breath fluctuates. When her posture is in the proper state of supporting the breath, she acknowledges that David then discusses the importance of vibrato as it forces you to connect to the breath.

Before studying with David, Skylar believed that her mouth had to be open wide to achieve the appropriate tone in higher registers. Realizing that a forward space and the necessary shaping help create the sound needed for a particular vowel, Skylar now focuses on the space and limits the jaw's movement. While she is transitioning from soprano to mezzo-soprano, David finds repertoire in several keys to allow Skylar to find what works best for her voice.

### *Case 5: Abigail - Applied Voice Student of Lucinda*

Abigail studies applied voice in Lucinda's studio. Acknowledging that her voice has grown, Abigail also recognizes that it is a learning process since every voice lesson may not go the way that she would like. Based on her singing experiences, Abigail believes a healthy singer includes having good breath support because if you are constantly running out of breath and trying to push the sound out, it is not good. Not having the best space is really bad because sometimes you seem to squeal. She knows that singing in the back of her throat is not necessarily unhealthy, but it does not make the best sound. She says the most important thing for her health-wise is not just the quality of the sound. Equally important are breath support and posture and then the space that you have in your head.

Remembering her posture before studying with Lucinda, Abigail knew she had grown and that Lucinda's ideas had carried over into her lessons. Now realizing that avoiding slouching and having the body straightened and tall and the sternum lifted, her sound is better and more comfortable for her. Abigail thought that in the early stages of voice lessons, breathing low meant more in the chest cavity. After discovering where the diaphragm was, Abigail notices the expansion around the middle of her torso, realizing that it is not just

sticking my stomach out or raising my ribcage.

With tone quality, Abigail is aware of Lucinda's desired sound: warm. Realizing that tone quality is more about where the sound is directed and how the mouth is shaped, Abigail has become analytical in her practice. She recalls that Lucinda will ask her questions related to her tone, such as did you like that sound? What was it that you did not like about the sound? Abigail considers vocal registration to be one register. Some singers can get confused when considering multiple registers, recognizing that the move from head voice to chest voice should feel connected. For Abigail, keeping the vowels in the same place, whether in the lower or higher registers, helps her to not notice a significant change in registers as she sings.

### *Case 6: Alivia - Voice Student of Jesse*

Alivia studies in Jesse's applied voice studio. During this time, Alivia has realized that studio time has allowed her voice to grow more than through any other singing opportunities. While continuing to learn healthy singing techniques, Alivia considers a healthy singer to be cognizant of what is going on inside her body. Also, she believes that she should make sure that she is working out in some way to help build her stamina. She hopes she knows that you are not singing from your stomach but from your diaphragm. Posture is very important. It is not healthy for your shoulders to rise every time you breathe. A healthy singer knows that you have to keep the energy going for you to project any tone. A healthy singer takes care of herself when she is sick.

Alivia considers posture to be foundational when it comes to singing correctly. During Alivia's studies, Jesse has taught her the anatomy and the effect lousy posture has on the singing voice. Before studying with Jesse, Alivia used an analogy, a sipping breath and a smelling breath often. The sipping breath is considered a breath that you take similar to that of sipping from a straw, giving you less inhalation. The smelling breath is a breath that you take with your nose, giving you a different inhalation feeling that is fuller than the sipping breath. By using the sipping and smelling breath, Alivia can set up her thinking when focusing on where to breathe and how to breathe when performing her repertoire. Alivia has also learned the analogy of pushing the gas, meaning to push the air, keeping it moving.

While Alivia considers her sound to be naturally darker, Jesse has encouraged her to get darker, since it allows her

*falsetto* to come in more. Realizing the importance of a consistent sound, Alivia notes that whether producing a darker or brighter sound, she reaches pitches in the upper and lower range with ease. She uses the analogy of a diving board to allow her to move from *falsetto* to her chest voice.

### Discussion

While the purpose of this study was to examine, three choral and three applied voice pedagogues' approaches to teaching healthy singing in their choral and applied voice studio settings, the study also wished to get the students' perspective. Like the pedagogues, the students had different definitions of healthy singing, although all mentioned aspects such as posture and breath support. It is interesting to note that most of the student participants indicated the importance of listening and taking care of the body, unlike the pedagogues. Overall, many of the students had similar responses to their pedagogues.

- **Posture.** Although choral students have the opportunity to sit during the rehearsal, the chorus students mention how their instructors stress sitting as if they are standing when singing. While Kaitlyn recalls her director using sayings such as sit on your sitz bones or alternate feet, Kimberly and Leslie are simply asked to sit at the edge of their chairs. The students also recognize that their choral directors are demonstrating proper posture by modeling it through their conducting stance.

Unlike choral students, the applied voice students stand for their one-hour lesson. While the choral students discussed the overall choirs' posture, the applied voice students immediately began discussing how their stance looked in early lessons compared with now. A common thread among the applied voice students was that they identified with slouching or shrugging their shoulders as a sign of bad posture. Overall, the students recognized that their choral and applied voice instructors taught proper posture through modeling and analogies to help them understand what posture should look like.

- **Breath support.** While Leslie mentions that her choral director doesn't explain breath support, choral students Kaitlyn and Kimberly recognize that breath support is discussed during the warm-up period. For Kaitlyn, this is completed by demonstrating a physical activity such as the tug-of-war


exercise. While this is an exercise that Kaitlyn enjoys and believes helps build breath support, she cannot explain how it helps, which shows a lack of understanding. For Kimberly, she recalls physical movement such as stretching while incorporating the breath or panting or yawning exercises.

To connect with the breath, the applied voice students pointed to the body as a whole. Abigail begins by recognizing where the diaphragm is and feeling the breath there, allowing her to control the intake of air. Skylar makes sure that her posture components are aligned, drawing the connection to proper breath support and connecting that to the use of vibrato. While the students here can make connections of the breath to another area of singing, these same students also show how important it is for instructors to state what proper breathing consists of clearly.

- **Tone quality.** While explaining how tone quality is presented by teachers during the choral rehearsal or applied studio lesson, the students recall the use of analogies, vocal exercises, modeling, and gestures as approaches their instructors have used. For most of the students, their choral director or applied voice instructor will discuss the importance of shaping to achieve the desired tone. For Kaitlyn, her choral director may use hand gestures to help the students form the vowel, while Skylar and Abigail's instructors may discuss the importance of space and where the focus of the sound should be. Students such as Kimberly and Leslie notice that their instructors simply use terms such as bright or dark to describe the tone quality that they are trying to achieve. Although each of these approaches is suitable, the author believes they must be explained to the students in detail over time.

### Conclusions

While this study represents a small number of choral and applied voice pedagogues in the field, it allows us to take a look at how singing instructors around the world are teaching healthy singing in their studios and rehearsals. The study also allows us to see how students respond to their instructors' methods of teaching and their ability to comprehend what they have learned. While the pedagogues in this study used analogies, imagery, and modeling as forms of teaching, their colleagues likely used other tools. Thus, it is essential for choral and applied voice pedagogues to share what may or may not be working in their daily teaching. It is also vital that our students continue to share their experiences so that

they understand better that there is more than one teaching method to teach the same techniques. It is through this approach that choral and applied studio teachers will be able to join together in the journey of building young, healthy singers. 

### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> H. Apfelstadt, L. Robinson, & M. Taylor, “Building Bridges among Choral Conductors, Voice Teachers, and Students.” *Choral Journal*, 44 no. 2, (2003): 25-33.
- <sup>2</sup> 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).