



Reconsidering the Use of Metaphor in Choral Rehearsals

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The bell rings, students have their folders in hand; the teacher has completed physical warm-ups and begins vocalizing. The teacher then models an ascending and descending penta-scale on an [i] vowel, and the singers echo that pattern. Without skipping a beat, the teacher provides feedback stating, “Very nice, let’s try that again, but this time use more air and imagine your voice is a dart being thrown across the room.”

As we examine this micro-teaching example, it is evident that the teacher has developed a plan, executed it, informally assessed the vocalise, and provided feedback. Although the feedback was delivered in a timely and succinct manner, the students do not know what was “very nice,” how to “use more air,” and how to correctly connect the image of a dart being thrown across the room to their vocal production.

Many choral directors have been in the situation of feeling tongue-tied or at a loss for describing what vocal quality is needed for a specific vocalise or selection of repertoire. When this occurs, directors sometimes resort to imagery or metaphor, as with the previous example, yet imagery and metaphor can cause confusion and produce unintended technical and musical problems.

Can we guess what the choral director’s objective was in the previous example from his/her feedback? Perhaps it was to get a louder, better supported, or even more focused sound. Yet, these phrases do not help students know how to achieve the results. There are many interpretations that the students can image from that type of feedback.

Some students might already be using enough air, and adding more air could cause hyper-adduction of the vocal folds or a pressed phonation. Others might be using breathy phonation and adding more air might make the quality even more breathy.

This tells us choral directors that we should refrain from utilizing imagery or metaphors that can be interpreted differently by individual students such as support from the diaphragm, place your sound in the mask, or sing forward.

Students ask: What is being supported? How do I put my voice in my mask? What is the difference between singing forward and backward?

It is sometimes easier to rely on these sympathetic vibratory sensations rather than focus on the structure within the mechanism that needs attention; however, such phrases can lead students to sing with undue tension and do not help them effectively adjust the element of their vocal technique that is causing the issue. Furthermore, not all students in the classroom experience sound, vowels, or imagery in the same way. The phrase support from your diaphragm provides little help since singers cannot be in direct control of their diaphragm, and it does not support sound.¹

Utilizing the term “placement” in teaching can cause students to literally try to place their sound in a specific area of the head or neck, causing tension and confusion. Richard Miller suggests that the teacher “understand the acoustic principle of resonator coupling in singing, and find some objective technical language to communicate this informa-


tion.”²

Thurman and others agree and suggest that “traditional vocal pedagogy (Western opera bias) encourages singers to focus or place their tone in the mask of the face. In inexperienced singers, a common response to this imagery is to raise the larynx and narrow the pharynx, thus robbing voices of appropriate fullness of voice quality and increasing laryngeal effort unnecessarily.”³

In addition, phrases such as “that was flat” or “you are sharp” do not help students understand how to improve their intonation and can negatively affect their psyche and self-confidence. Instead, teachers should find the mechanical reason for the intonation problems. Once students develop a simple language for breath, onset, and resonance, they can begin exploring these elements in the creation of vocal qualities alone and in groups.⁴

This approach requires a basic understanding of vocal pedagogy, voice science, and vocal anatomy. This knowledge can help choral directors create clearly defined goals and objectives in each warm-up exercise and then provide specific feedback. Research suggests that specificity in teacher feedback increases the overall magnitude of the feedback and helps students understand what they did well and what to modify on the next attempt.⁵

There are many avenues of inquiry and professional development within voice science and pedagogy within the United States. Here are a few:

- Estill Voice Training, www.estillvoice.com
- Summer Vocology Institute,
http://www.ncvs.org/svi_infous.html
- Voice Science Works (various workshops):
<http://www.voicescienceworks.org/> 

NOTES

¹ Scott McCoy, *Your Voice: An Inside View*, 2nd ed. (Delaware, OH: Inside View Press, 2012), 84.

² Richard Miller, *The Structure of Singing: System and Art in Vocal Technique* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996), 61.

³ Leon Thurman et al., “Singing Various Musical Genres with Stylistic Authenticity: Vocal Efficiency, Vocal Conditioning, and Voice Qualities,” *Body Mind & Voice: Foundations of Voice*

Education, ed. Leon Thurman and Graham Welch, Rev. Ed. (Minneapolis: The Voice Care Network, 2000), 521.

⁴ Brian J. Winnie, “Bridging the Gap between Classical and Contemporary Vocal Technique: Implications for the Choral Rehearsal,” *Voice & Speech Review*, in press, (September 2017) <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/23268263.2017.1370803>, (accessed September 4, 2017).

⁵ Tucker Biddlecombe, “Assessing and Enhancing Feedback of Choral Conductors through Analysis and Training,” *International Journal of Research in Choral Singing* 4, no.1 (2012): 16.