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**Practical Teaching Ideas
for Today's Music Educator**
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welcome

Welcome to ACDA's online magazine for choral director/music educators. The articles in this issue have been gleaned from state and division online and paper ACDA newsletters around the United States and from submissions by seasoned choral directors with topics germane to the profession.

ChorTeach, our name, is derived from the German word for chorus, chor. It is pronounced, as many of you know, like the word *core*. We hope *ChorTeach's* articles will be a breath of fresh air for you, provide you with new ideas or techniques that give you a lift, and help your singers reach the goals you and they have set. *ChorTeach* is designed for those who work with amateur singers at all levels.

If you have written an article and believe it would be of interest to *ChorTeach* readers, send it to chorteach@acda.org.

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Forests of Song: Building Environmental Stewardship through Choral Singing

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A choir is a lot like a forest. In the woods, trees work together to build beauty and give breath to the greater world. They create sanctuaries for animals and provide solace for visitors who pass beneath their branches. Through their interconnected root systems, they share nutrients and send strength to struggling trees. Likewise, choirs offer refuge to listeners and singers and add beauty to the world around them. Creating music in an ensemble strengthens and nourishes each singer along with the entire choir. Our interconnected choral communities are also healing resources for many.

It is no surprise that the natural world carries so many parallels to the musical one. Beethoven famously sought solace among the birds in the countryside, Grieg in his native mountains, and Vaughan Williams out at sea. With the earth now at a tipping point for ecological action and awareness, can our relationship with nature as singers make a difference? As both a choir conductor and wilderness instructor, I believe that it can. In many ways, caring for the earth can make us better singers, and singing can make us better stewards of the environment.

This is not particularly a new idea. In the 1920s, innovative educator Satis Coleman presented her Creative Music method, which, among other things, offered nature as a

source of inspiration for classroom music activities. She believed and taught that music existed beyond just intentional human creation and appeared all around in nature. She felt that students could hone their listening skills by spending time outside exploring the music of animals and the woods.¹

During the ecological revolution of the 1970s, Rachel Carson called for a return to a childlike awe for the outdoors, getting our hands dirty in the soil and reinvigorating those natural connections. She felt that children in nature can develop “a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life as an unflinching antidote against the boredom and disenchantments of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength.”² This sense of wonder translates well to music making and relates to how we experience beauty in sound.

Modern ecomusicologists recognize the powerful ties between music and the natural world. Importantly, these connections can help us establish a sense of place and root us in our own landscapes and culture, a critical component of stewardship. Environmental ethics specialist Lisa Sideris explains that “people will often defend places they know and love, but first they must become attached. They must

become native to the places they already inhabit.”³

It turns out that music is a potent tool in defining place for individuals. Whether conscious or not, you cannot help but feel rooted in the western American frontier when listening to Copland’s *Rodeo*, or sense the vast glacial expanse of Iceland with Sigur Rós’ music in your ears. It is more than just place and protection though.

Music and nature cross over in meaningful ways that help us perceive beauty more deeply, connect with greater compassion, and live more thoughtfully. As choir directors, we can create opportunities in the natural world that will both help the environment and enrich singers’ lives. Here are a few ideas to get you started.

Five Ways to Help Choirs Connect with the Earth

1) Place

Music tells the stories of our homes, both in the folk tradition and through modern invention. In some forms these are literal tales; our folk songs tell local stories that root us in communities and place. Performing these songs helps develop a cultural identity woven around natural areas that feel like home.

Other forms are more abstract, as when modern composers paint sonic images of landscapes and light. Nordic composers have set especially excellent examples here with an apt musical language for natural expression. Expanded, static harmonic movement overlaid with simple melodies often represents our movement through wild spaces. Ola Gjeilo’s *Tundra* is a beautiful example, transporting listeners to the Hardangervidda mountain plateau of his native Norway. Iceland’s Jón Leifs similarly depicts a drawn-out sunset in *Sólsetursljóð* with patient descending triads weaving their way around barren pedal points thus evoking the open regions of the North.

These are simple ways to help your choir develop a more intentional sense of place. Providing background and imagery while rehearsing or in concert can also help singers and audience members connect to the landscape. Are there local songs that are native to you, or could you commission one? Could your choir write one together?

2) Poetry

Good poetry is, of course, often the root of our repertoire choices. For ecological writing, the early transcendentalists helped us conceptualize place and being. Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, and others helped reform the nature paradigm as haven rather than hazard. They inspired a cultural embrace of wilderness as a refuge—in German, *Zuflucht*—literally a place we flee to.

Pioneering conservationist E.O. Wilson taught that “mankind...is the poetic species. The symbols of art, music, and language freight power well beyond their outward and literal meanings.”⁴ This power ignites the wonder we feel at the confluence of music and words. Thoughtfully selected texts can help choirs connect to nature and capture its energy.

Which nature poems inspire you or ground you to a place? Ēriks Ešņvalds’ *Stars* is a particularly moving setting of Sara Teasdale’s descriptive work with wonderful starlight sonorities coming from singing bowls or crystal glasses. One of my recent favorites is Jake Runestad’s *Come to the Woods*, which deftly tells the story of John Muir’s adventure taking in a Yosemite windstorm atop a towering Douglas fir tree.

3) Listening

In a conversation with artist Shon Henderson, he explained that when artists observe nature, they notice the finest details—the mechanics of a wing, the texture of bark. They develop wonder and fascination for it, and come to understand and respect its intricate beauty and inner workings over time as they (artists) strive to reproduce it on a canvas.⁵ This process can be the same for musicians but with our ears instead of our eyes. Learning how to actively listen to natural areas can foster deeper care for and understanding of our surroundings. Take your choir into wild spaces and have them engage in listening activities.

A tracker once taught me a powerful exercise: to find a quiet place and carefully listen in each direction. Sit for a moment to let the environment return to its natural state. Begin listening to the north as you stretch your ears and focus on the details. Do you hear wind rustling the grass or a distant brook? Then listen to the south. Can you hear the deer’s careful footsteps or a hare scampering around? Next, listen to the east. How far can you hear? Can you stretch it farther? Then to the west. Does the wind sound different there, or are there birds calling? Finally, connect the sounds

around you and listen to the whole. Try to hold a sonic image in your mind of your special space. Over time, this practice will sharpen your ears both in nature and in the choir while also connecting you deeply to your area.

Another effective extension is to draw a soundscape map. While listening, sketch a map with pictures of what you hear in different directions, like “sound marks” rather than landmarks. Try journaling about how your hearing changed or improved. Music that incorporates natural sounds can be an exciting way to provide similar experiences for audiences transporting them to specific places and environments. *Kondalillia* is a wonderful Australian work by Stephen Leek about a waterfall spirit, with the choir imitating sounds of the outback. Lydia Adams’s arrangement of *I’ko* from the Mi’kmaq First Nations people incorporates coyote, loon, squirrel, and other animal calls throughout the work and creates a rich atmosphere.⁶

4) Service

Service builds compassion for one another and empathy for those we serve. Conservation projects can be a powerful tool, on many levels, for helping people develop care for the natural world while building community within a group. Getting hands dirty in the soil connects people with the earth while working hard toward a common goal that will bond them together. Consider planning a choir environmental service project. Reach out to a local land management agency and develop a consistent partnership with a park or trail system. Serving together in the outdoors benefits both the choir and our planet.

Imagine offering an outdoor concert in the outdoor space following a day of service, with fellow trail workers, gardeners, and community members for an audience. Place-based compositions like Veljo Tormis’ *Looduspildid* could help celebrate a particular community ecology. Find local composers whose work you could commission and premier that is tied directly to place and the environment.

5) Creating Music

Creating music together is one of the most empowering and unifying experiences a group of people can have. In my first teaching job, I doubled as a music teacher and adventure coordinator for an expeditionary learning school in southeast Idaho. For music class, we would hike out to the greenway behind the school and have a natural materials jam session. Students would make instruments from sticks

and rocks and create their own ostinato patterns in small groups. Some students “played” the water with soft branches as we put all the parts together. Not only were they reinforcing the music fundamentals, they were also engaging with nature and with each other in profound, creative ways. These were memorable days for many of us.

These same activities could happen at a choir retreat or any dedicated rehearsal. A rehearsal can incorporate any level of musicianship nearly any place. Everyone has a voice to offer. Take five minutes, or an hour, and let folks make an instrument out of what they can find. Visit the woods, a beach, or seemingly barren land. Think about sounds inspired by previous listening experiences or involving unique timbres from your locale. Make it meaningful. Be sure not to lose any singers in the river!

Conclusion

The greatest challenge we face in environmental education is the notion that nature is a place we go to separate from where we are. When we can shift our thinking to nature being a part of all that we do and where we exist and find wonder, we can take action. As we sing in a way that connects us to the earth, we begin to carry the natural world more wholly in our hearts. Likewise, as we encounter wonder outside more fully, we transfer that into our music and art.

Sideris says that wonder creates “openness to the world around us, an increased receptivity to beauty and feelings of gratitude for it, a recognition of one’s place in something much more vast. All of it helps to instill a sense of humility and modesty, a sense of caution about our interventions in the natural forces around us.”⁷ As we and our singers engage with the earth through song, service, and creative exploration, we can create music full of beauty and protect an earth brimming with wonder. ■

NOTES

¹ Daniel J. Shevlock, *Eco-literate Music Pedagogy* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 3-6.

² Rachel Carson, *The Sense of Wonder* (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1965), 43.

³ Lisa Sideris, “Environmental Literacy and the Lifelong Cultivation of Wonder,” in *Teaching Environmental Literacy:*

Across Campus and Across the Curriculum, ed. Heather L. Reynolds, Eduardo S. Brondizio, and Jennifer Meta Robinson (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 92.

⁴ Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 74.

⁵ Shon Henderson, interview by author, Seattle, March, 2020.

⁶ This work is erroneously published as *Mi'kmaq Honour Song*, which is a different song and sacred to the Mi'kmaq people. Adams's arrangement is actually *I'ko*. Take care when introducing this to choirs and seek good background information; it can be a wonderful jumping off point for discussions about multicultural partnering and appropriation.

⁷ Sideris, 91.

Performance-Based Assessments in Choirs

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Choirs are uniquely positioned to include performance-based assessments as a part of singer learning and evaluation because performance itself is an integral part of music making. Performance-based assessments (PBAs) are assessments “in which the teacher observes and makes a judgement about the student’s demonstration of a skill or competency in creating a product, constructing a response, or making a presentation.”¹ Unlike exams and quizzes, PBAs are a type of authentic assessment, allowing opportunities for singers to show what they know through activities that mirror the tasks they may encounter in real life.² PBAs are applicable to courses in choir because many parallels can be drawn when comparing activities that young choristers engage in with the career of a professional musician.

In addition to concert performances, choral teachers may use PBAs in rehearsal. For example, singers can sight read an excerpt of music as evidence of the ability to read notation in contrast to answering dictation questions.³ Other PBAs I conduct in my public-school choir rehearsals are asking choristers to perform their parts in quartets (SATB, one voice on each part) and inviting student conductors (students in the choir) for warm-ups. PBAs of this nature provide an opportunity for me to assess music literacy and a knowledge of repertoire; however, they fall short when

evaluating other important areas of musicianship.

According to the National Association for Music Education (NAfME) Music Standards,⁴ students in secondary ensemble courses are expected to, in addition to creating and performing, respond and connect to music. One of the objectives provided by NAfME includes the following: Musicians should be able to “support personal evaluation of musical works and performance(s) based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria,” plus “synthesizing and relating knowledge and personal experiences to make music,” and “relating musical ideas and works from varied contexts to deepen understanding.”⁵ I set out to design a PBA that would emulate a task expected of professional musicians. It would also give singers an opportunity to show their understanding of these areas and the greater importance of music making.

I teach in a public school on Long Island. The choirs’ programs are thematic, with the themes chosen by choir members. They choose themes that are reflective of their lives and identities. Examples of themes from the last few years include loneliness (inspired by the pandemic), BIPOC composers, songs about liberation, religion, and environmental consciousness. Once the theme is chosen, I design the program with the assistance and approval of the choristers. I choose repertoire that is reflective of the abilities of

the ensemble while connecting to the greater idea offered by the singers.

Naturally, the repertoire and the theme spark conversations pertaining to social and environmental justice and the important role vocal music has in affecting change. In an effort to be mindful of rehearsal time while acknowledging student thought, I began to explore program notes as a platform for choristers to share their ideas about the music and its theme. Program note writing is a relevant task that is often expected of professional musicians. It creates spaces where young musicians can think critically about music and real-life issues. I believe it is a meaningful tool for evaluating student understanding.

The program note writing assignment is multi-modal in order to adapt to the needs of the singers. Some singers choose to write a short essay in the format of what musicians typically expect in a program note. Some write in their home language even if it is not English. Some choristers speak their ideas in a video recording via Flipgrid or YouTube, and some individuals group together to create a round-table podcast in which they engage in discussion about the repertoire and the theme. Choir members have also composed raps and poems and performed them in front of the ensemble.

This activity provides singers with a safe space to connect music with their lives while thinking critically about the repertoire and the topic for the concert. My goal is that afterwards, the singers feel a deeper responsibility for their performance and have greater knowledge of the repertoire and topic than before they began rehearsing. In addition to engaging in the music outside of rehearsal time, I found that there were several positive outcomes from this assignment. Sharing program notes has helped choir members learn about each other and foster connectivity and relationships that may not have existed before. The changes in relationships have positively affected our performance, since singers have a deeper appreciation for their commitment to themselves and each other and their role as choristers. Furthermore, program notes have inspired ideas for action in our community. For example, during a semester when our theme was LGBTQIA+ composers, one student wrote a program note that made connections between the struggles of this community in the music industry and in our school.

This note was brought to the attention of our administration by our former supervisor for fine and performing

arts (who identifies as gay), prompting discussions centered on how our district can support its LGBTQIA+ students and employees. The first course of action was to collaborate with our chapter of GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance) and take steps in classrooms, faculty meetings, and other school spaces toward understanding and normalizing vocabulary pertaining to the LGBTQIA+ community across the school district. Choristers were proud to be leaders in this systemic change in their community. As a result, they were more invested in the music because our concert became an opportunity to advocate for their peers.

Through this PBA, singers have found ways to advocate for their school music program. When writing program notes to be presented at the concert, singers consider their audience, which is made up mostly of non-musicians. They recognize that although the audience enjoys the music, they may not understand it or relate to it. The singers engage their audience by speaking about the music at the concert and why it is important to them, inviting their families and even administrators to become invested, too. Through program notes, singers are directly connecting with their audience. In addition, this approach has helped foster positive relationships between the vocal music program and the community.

Performance-based assessments such as concert performance sight-reading checks are valuable but only allow the opportunity to evaluate one part of the holistic musician. Through program note writing, directors can evaluate choristers' understanding of music and its function in society and their culture. Additionally, singers are participating in an activity in which they are exploring how the music is relevant to them and others and thinking critically about its purpose. Singers should engage in critical thinking and reflection. They are also sharing thoughts about musical interpretation based on personal experiences, all of which deepen their understanding of music.

Performance-based assessments can be a useful tool for singer evaluation, an authentic and meaningful experience which builds relationships and program advocacy. They can also be implemented in a variety of different teaching settings, including online learning. Perhaps most importantly, PBAs can exist alongside music performance to mobilize communities and affect change, thus affirming what vocal music has done for centuries. ■

NOTES

- ¹ J. H. McMillan, *Classroom assessment: Principles and practice for effective instruction*. 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2001).
- ² G. Wiggins, *Educative assessment*. “Designing assessments to inform and improve student performance” (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1998).
- ³ S. Scott, “Evaluating tasks for performance-based assessments: Advice for music teachers.” *General Music Today* 17(2) (2004).
- ⁴ National Association for Music Education (2014). “Music Standards: Ensemble.” <https://nafme.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/2014-Music-Standards-Ensemble-Strand.pdf>
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 6-8.

Who Should Attend Festivals?



You!

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Editor's note: See Choral Journal September 2021 (Volume 62, No 2) for "How Will Your Choir Be Judged? What Adjudicators Are Listening and Looking for at Festivals" by David Hensley.

The past year has seen festivals curtailed as the world has suffered through the Covid-19 pandemic. The lifting of restrictions and the return to relative “normalcy” will, hopefully, bring forth many choral festivals. Many choral teachers may be facing their first opportunities to attend festivals. Choirs may have lost singers due to online learning restrictions. It may be several years before large choral programs are able to regain their previous performance levels. With this in mind, the competitive nature of festivals may be somewhat lessened. The time is right for every choir to participate in a festival.

Whenever our backs are facing an audience, our credibility is on the line as choral directors. We are a silent instrument in a greater endeavor that makes music, but unlike a soprano or alto section whose many voices work together, we are the only one performing our role. Self-evaluation is a necessary part of conducting. We are constantly checking gestures and making suggestions to our singers. Attending a choral festival gives both the singers *and* their conductors the opportunity to be adjudicated.

In the right circumstances, this exercise can offer possible career enhancement. Some beginning conductors fear festivals or contests because of the possibility of less than favorable comments from adjudicators, but just as a young quarterback learns from actually playing the game, we choral directors learn from our experiences.

A festival presents at least three opportunities for learning in one venue. It gives you and the choir an opportunity to be professionally evaluated. It gives you and the choir an opportunity to hear other ensembles. It gives you and the choir an opportunity to perform for peers. All three of these reasons should be shared with singers and administrators so that they will understand and appreciate the event in advance.

What constitutes a choral festival? Although festivals may vary depending on the sponsor, there are, basically, two types: adjudicated and non-adjudicated. In an adjudicated choral festival, one or more expert clinicians (hereafter referred to as adjudicators) evaluate the performance of the choirs according to certain standards. However specific the standards, there is necessarily an element of subjectivity in this evaluation. Non-adjudicated festivals usually involve choirs performing either for one another or in combination, and while the opportunity to be professionally evaluated may be missing, the dynamics of performance and of

hearing other ensembles make these worthwhile events.

Choral festivals have long been a part of music education, giving student singers a goal in which to achieve a high rating as evidence of a performance of high quality. These events can be sponsored by local, county, regional, or statewide music teachers' organizations such as the National Association of Music Educators or the American Choral Directors Association. Each of these groups has standards for evaluation, which are usually printed on a generic form used by adjudicators at all of their events. The goal is to have all performing ensembles sing for adjudicators whose reputation and expertise are trusted and whose comments and ratings will be shared. Many school choirs nationwide make festival participation an annual expectation. Administrators often see festival ratings as viable and visible evidence of the success of their school choral programs.

From time to time, a community-based choir or collegiate choral department may host an adjudicated festival and may develop a similar adjudicative instrument. These festivals may be on an invitational basis, with the organizing sponsor inviting choirs that are known to be at or above a particular level of proficiency, assuring a quality performance by all who participate. The organizing sponsor of these festivals will usually seek out well-respected choral directors to serve as clinicians. Having experts as clinicians is at once a reason for choirs to attend the festival and an opportunity to meet higher than usual standards.

There are also a number of organizations that run "for-profit" choral competitions, often in conjunction with some sort of amusement park, popular vacation destination, or significant performance venue. While they may employ competent, noted choral experts as adjudicators, the very existence of these organizations is based on having enough choirs pay for the privilege of traveling to the festival site and taking advantage of the non-musical amenities that are offered.

These festivals may attract choirs through a set of rankings (e.g., first, second, third place) in categories that can range from size of school to the style of literature to the make-up of the choir (e.g., mixed chorus, men's chorus, or women's chorus). Needless to say, the cost of attending these for-profit festivals often include the expenses of lodging, meals, and amusement park tickets. These expenses must be a major factor in a director's decision to attend. There are many regions where vocal jazz, show choir, or

popular music festivals offer the same competitive options to ensembles. Some commercially sponsored festivals also offer performance categories for these types of ensembles.

The role of the adjudicator in any of these festivals is to evaluate each participating choir based on a set of criteria that are known to be standards of excellence. At most festivals hosted by a music teacher organization, adjudication can result in an overall rating. The terms "superior," "excellent," "good," "fair," and "poor" are common as are letter grades (A-B-C-D-F). Some festivals select an overall "best-in-show" for the highest-rated ensemble. This is very common at vocal jazz and popular music festivals. Regardless of how the choir is rated by adjudicators, their role is to provide a fair, accurate, and impartial evaluation from which the participating conductor and his or her singers can learn and, hopefully, grow musically.

It has been previously mentioned that an adjudicator is an individual who is selected because of his or her demonstrated expertise in the choral field. Some organizations appoint adjudicators based on the reputation of their choir's performances. While this logic appears sound, not every successful conductor is fair when evaluating the work of other choirs and conductors. Some festival hosts have a training process for their adjudicators, which strives to achieve some sense of uniformity in evaluations. Other hosts, usually of invitational events, rely on the recommendation of other choral teachers for persons to serve as an adjudicator.

The typical festival sponsored by the state or local music educator's association will give ratings that are posted for all to see. Along with the overall ratings are ratings in specific categories of choral skills. Many forms allow for limited written comments by the adjudicator. A number of festivals now utilize recorded comments made by the adjudicator as the choir is performing. This feature adds greatly, since the conductor and singers can hear exactly what the adjudicator is referring to as he or she speaks.

Some schools or districts require their music ensembles to attend festivals. Principals or music supervisors may ask for the adjudication forms. Invitational festivals may or may not give overall ratings or create rankings. Typically, information on adjudication and rankings can be found in the registration materials that are offered well in advance of the event. While most festivals take place during the spring semester, there are a number of organizations that sponsor fall festivals. There are even a few festivals during the first two weeks of December. They can become an excellent opportunity to

share holiday literature with others. Whenever the festival is available, directors should avail themselves of the opportunity to participate. This is especially true for those who are new to the profession, since it affords a great opportunity to share and learn new literature by other choirs while being evaluated in a professional environment.

Hosting a choral festival requires reasonably good organizational skills. Often, a school will be asked by a sponsoring organization to act as the site host. The opportunity to invite a number of choirs to your campus or local auditorium is at once exciting and somewhat daunting, but observation of the mechanics of a well-run festival and seeking the advice of former festival host directors makes this process rewarding for your choir and all of those choirs who choose to attend. Whether you host or travel to a choral festival, there are few if any opportunities that provide so many teachable moments in an hour or two of performances. As your career develops, consider it a responsibility to yourself and your singers to perform at choral festivals and learn from the experience. **CT**

Words Are in the Mouth— Quality is in the Throat

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Conductor: “*Choir, echo me [s, s, s]*”

Choir: “[s, s, s]”

Conductor: “*Great, now with more energy!*”

What are the possible goals of this basic exercise? Perhaps the goal is for students to be able to connect sound with breath, create more audible unvoiced consonants, or energize the body to prepare for the rehearsal. No matter the goal, what are the potential flow-on effects? In other words, what else might we inadvertently be teaching along the way? How does this correspond to a dynamic marking above a phrase? Does a forte apply to all consonants and vowels in each word equally? Which consonants are louder than others? How loud does a consonant have to be to match the dynamic level of a vowel? In order to answer these questions, let’s reflect on the title of this article. What does “Quality is in the Throat” mean? We first need to understand the distinction between speech sounds (vowels and consonants) and voice quality.

Kim Steinhauer et al. suggest that “speech sounds are produced primarily in the mouth or oral cavity; voice quality is produced by what is happening in the throat within the larynx and pharynx.”¹ Voice quality can be thought of as the overall characteristic sound of the voice regardless of frequency, loudness, or speech sounds. Basically, this means

that the sound is not going to change its overall color even when pitch, overall amplitude, or vowel and consonants shift. This is important because speech sounds have the potential to influence the resonance, or color, of a particular voice quality.

Vowels tend to get the greatest attention because voice quality can be most apparent when sustaining a vowel sound. Vowels can, however, be bright, dark, or somewhere along the continuum depending on various changes of voice structures. This occurs when structures change placements, causing different energy boosts of harmonics, which we perceive as brighter or darker qualities.

For example, an [i] vowel, which is commonly perceived as a brighter vowel, can be made darker by lowering the larynx, or even brighter by narrowing the epilaryngeal space via the aryepiglottic sphincter as in the childhood taunt “nyae, nyae, nyae.” This demonstrates the potential independence between voice structures in the throat and speech sounds made with the mouth (i.e., tongue and lips). Consonants can have just as much influence on voice quality. Care should be taken to understand the common consonant interactions with vowels and voice quality.

Consonants are constrictions or obstructions along the vocal tract and can be voiced or voiceless. Voiced consonants occur with vibration of the true vocal folds due to the interaction of air flow. Voiceless consonants occur with

air flow through the vocal tract without the true vocal folds set into vibration. Within these exist common consonants named by the manner of articulation: plosives, fricatives, affricatives, nasals, liquids, and glides (Table 1).

Table 1.
Consonant Chart Categorized by the Manner of Articulation

Manner	Voicing	Common Consonant Examples
Plosive	Voiceless	“p, t, k”
	Voiced	“b, d, g”
Fricative	Voiceless	“f, th (<u>th</u> in), s, sh, h”
	Voiced	“v, th (<u>th</u> ese), z, zh (pleas <u>u</u> re)”
Affricative	Voiceless	“ <u>ch</u> ” (cho <u>ic</u> e)
	Voiced	“ <u>j</u> ” or dg” (ju <u>d</u> ge)
Nasal	Voiced	“m, n, ng”
Liquids	Voiced	“l”
Glides	Voiced	“w” or “y” (yellow)

What follows are a few possible interactions between consonants and voice quality. Conductor-teachers should keep these in mind when working with consonants in order to develop consistency in desired voice qualities.

**Consonants and Airflow/
Subglottic Pressure**

Conductors-teachers should be aware of the level of subglottic pressure in voiced consonants and the level of constriction and airflow rate in voiceless consonants, which can be adjusted with training. For example, when conductor-teachers ask singers for louder voiceless fricatives (e.g., “s”), the constrictive behavior in the throat will likely increase and the abdominal muscles will contract abruptly. Is this the goal? If that bodily behavior is maintained into the subsequent vowel, or if students anticipate this instruction too early while singing the preceding vowel, it can negatively

impact the sustainability of those sounds. The likely result will be a constricted voice quality, breathy voice quality, or pressed (over-adducted) voice quality due to the interaction of the voice quality and the high airflow rate of the “s.”

Another example might be when asking for a stronger initial “g” as in the word give. This could cause a larger build-up of subglottic pressure below the closed vocal folds causing a pressed sound to occur on the subsequent vowel. Therefore, care should be taken to avoid flow-on effects of consonants to preceding and subsequent vowels. Students can learn to sustain stopped voice plosives, such as “b” and “d,” with a reduction of the constriction and subglottal pressure. Have singers explore the sensation by singing successive “b’s” and “d’s” as quickly as possible.

Consonants and Onsets

There are three vocal onsets that can occur at the true vocal folds: glottal, aspirate, and smooth (simultaneous or balanced). These can be performed at various effort levels of vocal fold closure and rates of airflow. Voiceless consonants do not have an onset since the vocal folds are not set into vibration and can therefore intentionally or unintentionally cause a change in a subsequent vowel onset. For example, sing the word happy on a comfortable pitch. If you sustain the initial “h” with a high airflow rate and then proceed to sing the [a] vowel, the vowel quality of the [a] will either be breathy from an aspirate onset or pressed from an effortful glottal onset. Both could have been caused from the high level of airflow in the initial “h.” Singers should be trained to perform any desired onset regardless of how the preceding consonant is produced.

Voiced consonants all have an initial onset, which can have a direct effect on the voice quality as well, although these can be adjusted with training. For example, an aspirate onset, with air starting before vocal fold closure will likely produce a voiced consonant with a breathy quality. This may be advantageous for certain pop styles that use a microphone. A low effort glottal onset may help produce a closure of the vocal folds prior to airflow, which will likely produce a louder dynamic result. This can be due to the interaction of glottal onsets thus helping to achieve a thicker vocal fold body-cover or chest register voice quality.

A smooth onset can help achieve a softer dynamic. Try to first practice these onsets with a vowel of your choice, such as [i]. Then have students sustain the vowel and then

close to a voiced consonant such as [z]. As the change from vowel to consonant occurs, have students try to maintain the overall quality of the sound. Then have singers attend to these onsets starting on a voiced consonant instead of a vowel.

Consonants and Coarticulation

While singing the previous “happy” exercise, you may have noticed the phenomenon known as coarticulation. This occurs when production of one speech sound influences a surrounding speech sound. For example, the [a] vowel in the happy exercise influenced the “h” quality. Try to sustain the “h” in the word “hoot” and then sustain the “h” in the word “happy.” You will notice that the “h” sound is simultaneously influenced by the tongue position and, maybe even more importantly, the larynx position of the following vowel. These elements may be desirable in a more contemporary commercial styling such as pop or jazz but need to become independent of one another in a typical classical voice quality. Remember, however, that the overarching goal is to train independence of speech sounds from voice quality.

Another example of coarticulation occurs when a nasal consonant such as the “n” in the word “hand” causes the preceding vowel [a] to become nasalized. In a classical context, singers typically desire to remove this coarticulation. This takes training and is not suitable for vernacular styles such as pop. In order to make a pop style sound more authentic, singers can allow the ending of the [a] vowel to become nasalized with a lowering of the velum (soft palate) before transitioning into the “n.”

Consonants and Pitch

Voiced consonants occur with vocal fold vibration. It can be advantageous for singers to match the pitch of the voiced consonant with the pitch of the subsequent vowel, especially on an ascending interval. For example, sing the word “singing” with the first syllable “sing” on a C3 or C4 and the next syllable “-ing” on a G3 or G4, respectively. Be sure to sing the “ng” on a G3 or G4 pitch. Now keep the “ng” on the lower pitch, and you might notice the difficulty.

Consonants can also influence the pitch of a subsequent vowel. If singers are required to sing louder-voiced consonants such as “z,” they may use the same subglottic pressure in the subsequent vowel. This can cause a raising of

the pitch or sharpening to occur after the consonant. If the subglottic pressure and airflow are allowed to change as needed to produce a similar quality on each speech sound, the change in pitch frequency will not occur.

Figure 1 depicts an acoustic spectrogram image of three different sustained consonants transitioning into a vowel. All three vowels were sung at the same frequency for each example. The first example, [z] to [i], was performed by trying to maintain the same subglottic pressure when transitioning into the vowel. The pitch fluctuated at the transition and momentarily sharpened.

The second example, [s] to [i], was performed trying to maintain the same amount of airflow when transitioning into the vowel. Again, the pitch raised at the onset prior to coming back to the intended pitch.

The third example, [z] to [i], was performed with adjustments to subglottic pressure and airflow to maintain the same pitch and voice quality during the transition from consonant to vowel. The pitch did not shift.

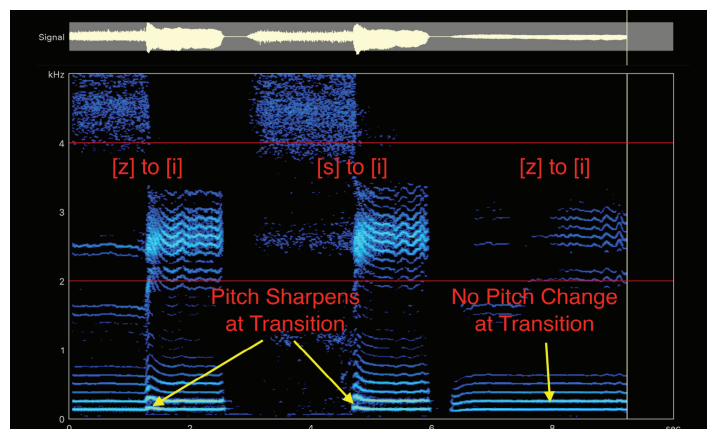



Figure 1. Spectrogram image of the relationship between consonants and pitch

Consonants and Dynamics

Consonants are perceived softer than vowels, so if a consistent legato is desirable, it can be advantageous to make the consonants louder, especially voiced consonants. Fred Waring’s book, *Tone Syllables* (1945), focused on equalizing the dynamics of consonants to vowels but did not specifically discuss voice quality interaction. Since dynamics are a result of changes in the vocal mechanism, it is important to consider voice quality in this equation. For example, if singing the word, “sing,” in a classical style, the initial “s” can be made louder by maintaining more constriction in the

throat and a higher larynx position. Then the voice quality needs to quickly adjust to a moderately-low larynx with no constriction in the throat and a reduction of airflow from the “s” to the subsequent vowel.

The last speech sound, “ng,” will need to be louder than the preceding vowel sound in order to match the perceived intensity of the vowel. This can be accomplished by singing the vowel in a thin fold, or more head voice, and then the “ng” in a thicker vocal fold body-cover, or more chest voice. Another option could be to narrow the aryepiglottic sphincter to add intensity in the “ng.” Sometimes the answer is also to make the consonant longer in duration.

Conductor-teachers can begin to incorporate these ideas into score preparation and the choir’s daily warm-up. Eventually a scaffolded process can be developed to integrate these concepts in varied voice qualities. This can help conductor-teachers move toward a more comprehensive approach to teaching voice quality. It can help singers explore expressivity from a more holistic view. These ideas can easily be incorporated into in-person or online teaching. Visit www.brianwinnie.com to learn more about the integration of these concepts into a choral rehearsal. For further professional development in voice science, visit estillvoice.com or voicescienceworks.org. These websites include a wonderful list of additional resources. 

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NOTES

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Choir Practices That I Plan to Use After the Pandemic

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(Used with permission of the author)

This past year has been extremely difficult for the choral community since many of us, both directors and choristers, have been let go or have dropped out, reduced in hours, or simply reduced to just getting by. We have had to redefine our jobs in order to stay relevant to our churches, schools, and communities.

It should be no surprise that adapting to new technology was absolutely critical to not only keeping our programs going but also for maintaining our employment status. We have learned about virtual choirs, editing, plug-ins, community, prayers, practice tracks, and about connecting with our choirs outside of the rehearsal. There is nothing good about Covid but, for me, adapting my choirs to the social distancing strategies has introduced methods of working that I will keep throughout my career after the pandemic.

Virtual Choirs

Thousands of virtual choirs were created during Covid. My choirs recorded about fourteen virtual recordings; my university recorded about twelve. Virtual recordings are time consuming and frustrating but offer many possibilities for growth of the choir members. For example, many in my choir were forced to actually learn their parts as opposed to relying on their section leaders or persons they usually sang next to.

Our choirs learned how to perform the music. With everyone's face looking into a camera, it became impossible to hide insecurities and distracting quirks as we sang. I commend all singers who were able to take part in virtual choirs for this reason. It takes courage to put one's self out there in this way and then to judge one's own video. The choir videos forced us to connect with our music as communicative partners. Our videos connected with people around the world and will continue to do so, something of a surprise for some of the singers.

Editing future videos will also provide directors a deeper understanding of how they need to shape their rehearsals. When I edit my singers in Logic, I see exactly how their breath is functioning, where the tone is not supported and on pitch, etc. These factors teach us, as directors, how to be clearer in our instructions regarding consonants, releases, and breath. Every single note lets us learn more about our singers in a way that hearing an entire ensemble regularly does not.

Rehearsal Tracks

I will continue to use rehearsal tracks. During Covid, I had to make several rehearsal tracks on my MIDI keyboard and Logic Pro software. I started very plainly but then used more plugins like Spitfire Audio for orchestral instruments

and changed tempos. I would also conduct in-rehearsal videos for singers who needed more clarity for cutoffs, tempo, and breath support. I noticed something else happening when I made all of these items available. My choirs no longer relied on a normal rehearsal to learn their music.

Many choirs practice hard to learn their music throughout the week, but for those students who do not read music or have little music training, having these custom rehearsal tracks created an equitable approach to choir singing that felt more inclusive since it met people where they were. My choirs practiced more because they had an obstacle removed, and the music became, once again, central to their practice.

Virtual Rehearsals

My choirs will be rehearsing in person once it is safe again, but that does not mean that I am finished with virtual rehearsals forever. Rather, I will include virtual sessions in my schedule of rehearsals. One reason is because it is accessible to our older choir members who cannot drive here at night or if they are sick and cannot come to rehearsals. My in-person rehearsals will also have an online component since it allows the sick to feel like a part of our choral group. Other reasons to include virtual rehearsals from time to time is to address problems that the director can demonstrate for the choir to imitate. These need not be long rehearsals but should have a specific focus.

Community

During Covid, our sense of community was lost or severely affected. Our choir members scattered. Many of us at schools and churches have to rebuild. Support for one another is going to be key in creating a self-sustaining network of singers and directors. I noticed that many of our newest singers were the ones who were always on the edge of the choral community. These are the people we need to reach out to and make sure they feel included and are vital members of the choir program. Our choirs need constant encouragement.

The choral community/our choirs have never been tested like Covid has challenged us. Conductors rely on the weekly services at our churches or rehearsals; efforts to connect with our singers was at the center of our programs, and every prayer, follow up, phone call, or zoom call was

important. The same effort needs to be made in the years following the pandemic.

Including online virtual rehearsals, choir tracks, and virtual choir projects in our music programs after Covid will be a huge help in revitalizing our choirs as we rebuild. This hybrid format may be difficult for many to adapt to. Given the fact that Covid has put many of our choral projects on hold, I hope to come away from this pandemic with more resources to better equip me to work successfully with our choirs. **CT**

Thank
You

I want to thank all of the authors who have contributed to *ChorTeach* from around the United States for the past thirteen years. You made this online journal successful because of the breadth of your diverse topics. I am also grateful to Amanda Bumgarner and Ron Granger for preparing each issue of *ChorTeach*. The purpose of *ChorTeach* is to provide practical solutions for challenges faced by choral directors at the K-12 level and community and church choir directors. If you wish to read articles on a particular topic, please consult the *ChorTeach* Index at www.acda.org/chorteach. I am also grateful to our former ACDA executive director, Tim Sharp, for asking me to start *ChorTeach* in 2008. As ACDA continues to develop and expand resources for those teaching at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, it is a pleasure and privilege to welcome a new editorial board starting in 2022. Please consider submitting an article that is the result of your solving a challenge you have faced in your rehearsals to chorteach@acda.org. Thank you, again, for submitting your articles for possible inclusion in *ChorTeach*.

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