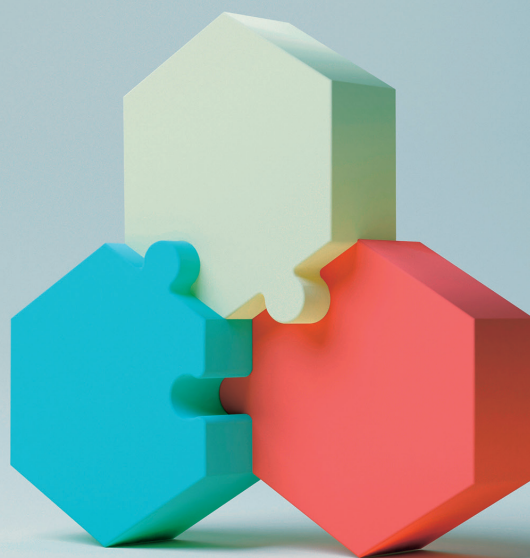


Translating Emotion to Expression: Five Strategies to Try

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Students are constantly looking for positive ways to express themselves. They want to feel valued, heard, and understood. Due to tragic events in schools every day, more research and attention are on social-emotional learning, trauma-informed pedagogy, and culturally responsive pedagogy. All these philosophies put the whole student and the whole singer at the forefront of learning. Each day, students bring their experiences, traumas, expertise, and assets to our classrooms. This is a great opportunity for choir directors to allow students the chance to channel their emotions in a healthy way that impacts audiences. The challenge for choir directors is how to engage students in the process of translating their emotions in a way that ultimately reaches the audience. Translating internal emotion to external expression in a way that is unified, free from vocal or visual distractions, and congruent to the song's lyrical, musical, and contextual intent is a tall but exciting task.

This article breaks down vocal and visual expression into five “rules” or principles that streamline instruction and allow students the opportunity to create expressive decisions for themselves in a healthy manner. I constantly

refine these rules: adding, removing, and clarifying principles, so the rehearsal is more impactful for students and myself. There are many more strategies available, so it is vital for the director to decide what works best for their ensembles. The strategies in this article are not meant to “technique” emotion or expression. Instead, the purpose of this article is to provide a simplification of the many individual tasks we ask our students to do on a regular basis into categories they understand.

As directors, everything we say and do matters because it creates a response from our ensembles. This applies to us as coaches as well. Research suggests that 93% of what the audience receives is nonverbal communication, which is why conducting clarity is so important.¹ However, this makes the 7% verbal communication that much more important. How many times have we said to our chorus, “Lift that phrase ending,” “Stronger ‘c’ on the word ‘can,’” or “get louder here?”

Choir directors can easily fall into the trap of spending too much time talking about individual spots in music, as opposed to teaching bigger “rules” or patterns. Therefore, about five years ago, my co-director, Jason Martin, and I created a system of five basic rules of articulation, which helped our choruses take more ownership of their learning and increased their retention. After practicing



these principles, I would simply say “Rule 4” instead of “Stronger ending consonant on the word ‘love’” or “Rule 1” instead of “These four notes all sound the same. Crescendo through this phrase instead of having everything having equal weight or importance.” These rules helped us streamline rehearsal and maximize singers singing instead of the directors talking. As I introduce these concepts with my students, I start with singing a simple song or round without paying any attention to the concepts. Then, I introduce and reinforce each concept with that simple song.

Rule 1: No Two Consecutive Notes Can Sound the Same

Monotony and direct repetition are the enemies of artistic, expressive singing. Therefore, our first “rule” is that “no two consecutive notes can sound the same.” There should always be a difference in dynamic, color, articulation, mood, emotion, or something else because the lyric, pitch, or meaning shifts. To make the phrase interesting for singers and audiences, each note should be given its value and importance. This is like lyrical development, where there are natural stresses and releases built into the poetry.

Rule 2: Long Notes Must Go Somewhere

Any rhythmic duration longer than one beat in a piece must have life, dynamic contrast, twang change, or another modification. For instance, when a quarter note gets the beat in a piece, any duration longer than a quarter note must grow or decay in terms of dynamics, tone color, or excitement. This rule partners with rule one because long notes that are simply held increase a feeling of monotony or “flat lining.” Monotony and “flat lining” are not musical choices. Instead, think of notes as always growing toward a destination or coming back from that destination. Additionally, think of the lyric and which words within the phrase are more important. Emphasize the most important words and de-emphasize the less important words.

Rule 3: Unified Target Vowels/Matched Resonances

Vowels provide art and beauty to words. Unifying the vowel increases the opportunity for lock and ring. In the extremes of our range, singers oftentimes must modify the

vowel for tone clarity and beauty. It is important, therefore, to match resonances even when the pure vowel is not necessarily 100% aligned. When teaching this rule, your ensemble must know exactly what vowel choice you want from them. Either using basic International Phonetic Alphabet symbols or simply spelling out the vowel choice is vital. For example, the word “sing” could either be sung as [i] or [I] or as “seeng” or “sihng.” Vowel work is tedious, but unifying vowels helps provide clarity of lyric and tone beauty.

Rule 4: Every Consonant Must be Observed, Technically and Emotionally

While vowels provide art and beauty to language, consonants provide drama, excitement, and clarity to words. In barbershop, we are a lyrically driven, vernacular art form, where we often refer to spoken language to inform how we pronounce sung text. This rule focuses not only on precise consonants but emotionally driven consonants that propel the musical and lyrical message. The first step is making sure that the audience understands your text. However, the greater objective is a human connection through lyrical and musical delivery.

Another consideration for consonant and vowel clarity is stylistic considerations. For example, directors may have different value sets for spiritual consonants and vowels as opposed to Brahms. Instead of “proper diction,” a value might be “lyrics, performed in a stylistic appropriate manner, should be heard and understood by the audience.” This definition might provide more clarity for singers as opposed to simply “proper diction.” It is important for directors and singers to know the genre-specific values and incorporate them into these expression “rules.”

Rule 5: End the Phrase in Preparation for the Next One

Musical and lyrical phrases are sequential; they build off each other. How we end a phrase can connect the phrases or temporarily break this connection. If the dynamic level at the end of a phrase is dramatically different from the start of the next phrase, the audience gets confused, unless there is a purposeful reason. Additionally, the ensemble should sing the end of a phrase, with the intent to highlight the next lyrical or emotional point in the story. Emotional shifts occur in the breath between phrases, but the line and




musical development are in both phrases to connect the two. This rule is one of the more challenging, high-level skills listed, but it can easily provide the most impact.

Conclusion

These five rules serve my ensembles well, both in the choral and barbershop realm. I consistently evolve the terminology of the rules to better convey my messages. Singers thrive on structure and clear director communication. They need to know exactly what we want them to do. By teaching simple, overarching principles, singers have fewer things to remember, and these tasks become habitual quicker. The goal is for singers to sing more and for directors to talk less. Having consistent expectations and terminologies helps achieve this goal.

Emotion is internal, but expression is external.² Oftentimes when we engage in conversation, there are misunderstandings or miscommunications. This translates to our communication as singers. Students and directors spent many months locked up at home and rehearsing via Zoom and are looking for ways to express themselves. Audiences come to concerts for entertainment. By creating systems where students feel like they have the opportunity and permission to have fun while singing and express that fun, it creates a system where everyone wins. Ultimately, singing is fun. If we, as choir directors, can harness what our students already do so well and increase the joy and expression factor, students get to express themselves in healthy ways, technical issues may improve, and audiences get the gift of a passionate ensemble.

For future reference, there are two sources that provide constant inspiration as I strive for more impactful, musically driven performances: James Jordan's book,³ *The Choral Warm-up*, and a Youtube video⁴ by the Barbershop Harmony Society, "HU Online: Directors...STOP TALKING with Don Campbell and Kirk Young." Both resources focus on technique through artistry and musicianship in an approach that is predominantly singers singing, not directors talking. 

NOTES

- ¹ John Stoker, *Overcoming Fake Talk: How to Hold Real Conversations that Create Respect, Build Relationships, and get Results* (McGraw Hill Education, 2013).
- ² Christopher Loftin, *Visual and Vocal Expression in Traditional Choirs: An Explanatory-Sequential, Mixed Methods Design* (Dissertation, Auburn University, 2023). Proquest.
- ³ James Jordan, *The Choral Warm-up: Methods, Procedures, Planning, and Core Vocal Exercises* (Chicago: Gia Publications, Inc., 2005).
- ⁴ Don Campbell and Kirk Young, "HU Online: Directors... STOP TALKING with Don Campbell and Kirk Young," Barbershop Harmony Society, streamed live on April 10, 2023, YouTube video, 1:23:24, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sQMp2jK99NY>.