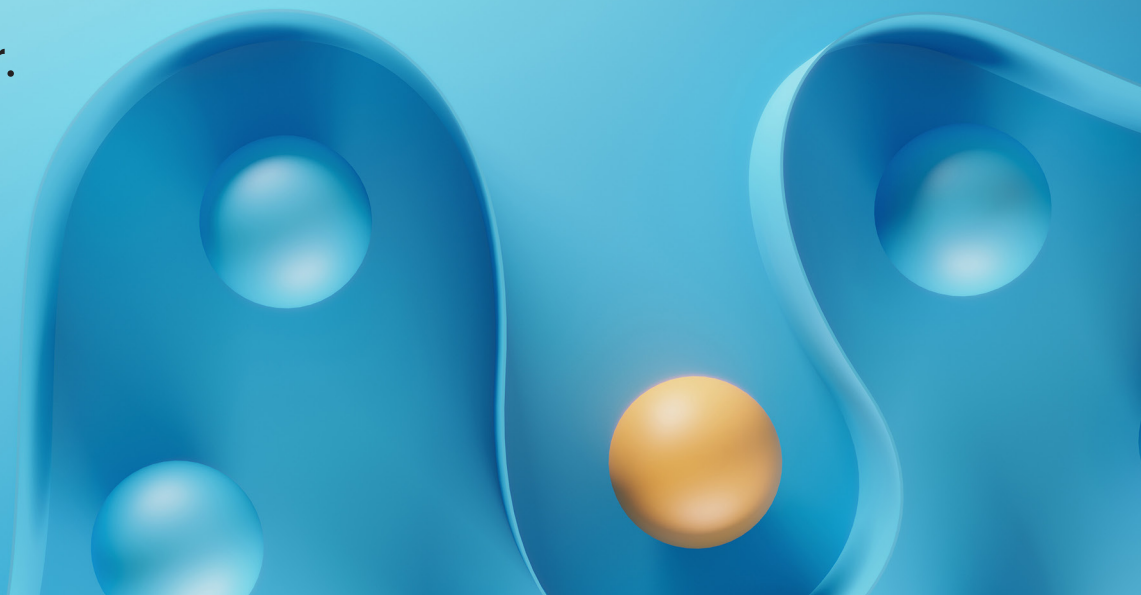


Teaching Strategies for the Out-of-Balance Ensemble

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One commonality between my experiences singing in the middle school and high school choirs was the largely disproportionate ratio of male to female¹ singers—a ratio that did not exist in the more advanced choirs offered by the two programs. Conversations since with other middle school and high school colleagues around the Southeastern United States echoed similar experiences with their introductory ensembles, especially when a tenor/bass choir for new students was not offered. It was clear to me that I needed to learn more about teaching strategies for these out-of-balance ensembles.²

This article will seek to offer strategies to help choral educators to engage and retain middle school singers. These strategies include the singer's self-efficacy, voice change and matching pitch, repertoire selection, and how to arrange repertoire to fit the needs of the choir. While at times the focus is specifically on helping retain males in a choir of mostly females, the suggestions presented here will positively impact the entire choir.

Participation Rates

The low participation rate of males in choir as compared to females is nothing new to the literature and has been a

topic of discussion in music education conversations for much of the century.³ There are potentially many reasons as to why male participation in choir is disproportionate; Frederick Swanson offers three possible reasons.⁴ Though an older source, these are still applicable today:

(1) Male voice change. Males undergoing voice change can have lower self-efficacy beliefs and neglect to sign up for choir for fear of not being good enough or are embarrassed of their changing voice.

(2) Singing becomes an elective. During the elementary years, singing is often a core component for all students in their music education; beginning in middle school, singing becomes elective and students could potentially sign up for other electives or choose to pursue athletics.

(3) Singing in a new idiom. The males who sang in elementary school often sing the melody or other simple harmonic lines within close proximity to the melody. During middle school, on the other hand, when males are amidst the vocal change process, they will often be assigned to a tenor/baritone/bass part, on an unfamiliar clef, singing notes that are much lower and harmonically strange to their ears. To sum up our challenge in choral classrooms where males and females are grouped together, the females can be developmentally ready for more advanced singing experiences, whereas the males are singing unfamiliar harmonies with changing voices or newly minted changed voices. Effective choral educators must have instructional strategies at the ready to engage all of these singers regardless of their level of vocal development.

Steven Kronauer, of the LA Children's Chorus Young Men's Ensemble, clearly expresses our charge. Instructors must possess:

an intense knowledge of the physiological changes the boys are undergoing, strong knowledge of vocal development, knowledge of choral repertoire suited to this unique time, and a sensitive, kind soul who builds an environment of trust alongside artistry.⁵

The Singer's Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy can be defined as the individual's judgment of their capability to accomplish a given task.⁶ Individuals with higher self-efficacy beliefs tend to exert more effort and show higher levels of perseverance toward their goals than do individuals with lower self-efficacy beliefs.⁷ Using these operational definitions, self-efficacy, which is closely related to self-confidence, expresses that if our students have higher confidence in their ability to sing in a choir, they will show more effort and perseverance during our long and focused choral rehearsals. Furthermore, to take a direct transfer from the realm of athletics, there is a key figure who is largely responsible for maintaining and building collective efficacy beliefs, and that person is the team leader—the coach.⁸ In our world of choral education, we, the director, shall take primary responsibility in the development of an environment that builds the efficacy beliefs of all our singers.

There are many ways to go about building self-efficacy. While participating in beginning or introductory ensembles, students will feel more assured and confident when they're singing the melody that is well within their operational vocal range. Of course, we want all our singers to experience the joy of singing harmonies; however, when students are new to your school, to the ensemble, or to singing in general, it can be quite advantageous to their self-efficacy if they can develop their initial singing habits while singing melodies.⁹ Higher self-efficacy beliefs can also be reinforced in rehearsals where the director appropriately scaffolds instructional steps, being careful not to overwhelm the students, so that the new knowledge and/or skills can be built affirmingly. The director must also have patience to allow for consistent productive repetitions over time to allow for the knowledge and skills to become habit.

The Changing Voice and Matching Pitch

Having the students singing in comfortable ranges is a bit more complicated than simply assigning them a voice part. To choose repertoire and other vocal exercises that build self-efficacy, the director must first know every singer's voice. Where are they comfortable singing? Where are their voices most resonant? How well does the male transition from head-voice to their chest-voice? The truth is, from grades 6 to 9, directors will have a bit of everything—from unchanged high voices, to voices going through vocal change, to students with newly changed baritone and tenor voices. One thing that is common through these stages of change, however, is that some of your singers will have difficulty matching pitch.

Matching pitch is an important component toward building higher self-efficacy. In fact, even while participating in the most casual of singing environments, the ability to match pitch has been observed as a prerequisite if that experience is to be viewed as successful.¹⁰ When the singer is aware of their lack of pitch matching ability, perceptions of non-musicality can develop to where the singer may believe that they “can't sing” or “can't hold a tune in a bucket.”¹¹ These perceptions can have detrimental effect on their self-efficacy, which could result in a lack of participation in any form of music making.¹²

Because our students will have a wide variety of pitch matching ability, it is important to have a clear idea as to where the students' singable range is before any work is started to correct pitch matching issues. Evaluating the singable ranges can be done individually in a separate room or by having them sing one at a time in front of their peers. Facilitating this task as a group may be less traumatizing and a more efficient use of time. Irving Cooper provides an easy model to follow, which has been adapted by Judy Bowers as follows:

*“Jingle Bells” Group Test Model for Identifying Singable Ranges*¹³

Step 1:

Have the group sing “Jingle Bells” in the key of D major. This will place the initial pitch on F[♯]. As they sing, take note of the males who are singing the melody down the octave and matching pitch; these are likely changed voices and you will want to seat these students together in a section.

Step 2:

Sing the melody again but now in the key of G major. As before, listen closely to the students who are matching pitch. The males matching pitch and singing in the upper octave are likely unchanged treble voices, and like before, you'll seat these singers together as a section.

Step 3:

Once more, have the group sing the melody but now in the key of A major. The males with changing voices and matching pitch will likely be the ones undergoing vocal change and should be seated together in a section. The males whom you've indicated as unable to match pitch in any of these keys would be the students you'll want to work with either in small groups or individually. Directors should note that this three-step process may need to be repeated throughout the school year so that the director can be well informed as to the male's developing singing ability.

Now that the males in various stages of vocal change have been identified along with those who are struggling with matching pitch, the next step is to equip them with strategies to be successful in matching pitch. How often and for how long you meet with individuals or small groups will vary greatly between programs, but it is recommended that you try to meet with them at least once a week for five minutes of focused coaching. As you meet with them, keep in mind that their self-efficacy may already be on the lower side, as sometimes the individual could be embarrassed about their current level of pitch-matching ability. Do your best to keep these coaching sessions affirming and enjoyable by employing positive feedback, both verbally and non-verbally. Alan McClung, of the Cambiata Institute, has a very useful and practical four-step guide to helping learn to match pitch.

Strategies to Develop Pitch Matching Skills in the Singer with Inconsistent Pitch¹⁴:

Step 1: Have the student sing a pitch, which the director then matches.

This is an affirming exercise because whatever pitch the students chooses to sing will be the correct one. For a student whose self-efficacy is low, in terms of matching pitch, this type of exercise provides a launching point for the teacher and student to have discussions about recognizing

matching pitch. The student can then be encouraged to choose another pitch and the process begins anew. Once the director is convinced that the student can recognize the unison pitch, the director may feel free to proceed.

Step 2: The director sings a pitch, which the student then matches.

Obviously, the initial pitch must be one that is within the singable range of the student. This step can be more challenging than the first for the student, but the director should stay positive and choose pitches that have the highest probability for success for the student. This is not the time to challenge the student's ability. As before, keep this step positive and enjoyable. Praise the student when they are able to match the director's pitch.

Step 3: Pitch sliding to the desired pitch.

Demonstrate this by having the student sustain a pitch. While they sustain, the teacher will vocally slide in pitch, from above or below, and stop and sustain when they match the student. Try this a few times with different pitch targets and then reverse the roles. The director then provides a pitch that the student should attempt to slide into until the two pitches are matching.

Step 4: Repeated pitch on "Hey, hey, hey, hey."

McClung approaches this step from a neurological basis. He explains that a specific pitch synapse is responsible for inconsistent pitch singing and in order to correct this, multiple successful firings are required. For this step, choose a comfortable pitch that the student can sing successfully, and march around the piano singing the same pitch repeatedly on each marching step. After a couple of laps, reverse direction and choose another pitch.

Choosing Repertoire

The task of choosing repertoire can be exhilarating and excruciating. Despite those feelings, how the director handles the selection of repertoire for a choir that is largely out of balance becomes exponentially important to the musical experience of the singers, the final performance, as well as the interest and enthusiasm for the choral program once the concert is completed.¹⁵ When considering repertoire for an unbalanced ensemble, two foundational criteria are occasionally at odds with one another, and the director must

choose which criteria is more pertinent. These are the technical and aesthetic criteria.

Some directors will frequently choose repertoire primarily along aesthetic lines; however, in an effort to be inclusive of all singing abilities, directors are urged by experts to rely more on the technical criteria when selecting repertoire for this particular type of ensemble.¹⁶ Quite simply, although it is important to sing music that is aesthetically pleasing, it does no benefit to the unbalanced choir if the technical aspects of the music or singing ranges are too far outside of the students' comfort zone. By choosing repertoire that challenges the singers, but not so much that their self-efficacy suffers, the director gives the ensemble the best possible opportunity to have a successful and enriching experience.

What if the director doesn't feel they have enough tenors and basses to sing SATB literature? What if they are concerned with major balance issues? Shouldn't these unbalanced choirs simply program SAB literature? Choosing SAB literature solely based on the number of singers may seem like a logical choice, but developmentally and musically, the vocal needs of developing voices may not be met. John Cooksey cites that SAB music contains poor voice leading, and the baritone part frequently becomes more of a compromise between the three voice parts. In addition, it's frequently observed that the baritone part is too high for new baritones and too low for new tenors or unchanged voices. Finally, males undergoing voice change often have a gap between their chest voice and their head voices—notes they physically cannot sing yet. Unfortunately, many of the baritone parts found in SAB literature are placed within or very near to these gaps in vocal ranges.¹⁷

If the arranger tries to correct the issue of singing too often in the break by making the baritone part lower in the bass clef, it then becomes too low for the changing and unchanged male voices. Assigning these males to a voice part that is frequently too low for them can have detrimental effect on their self-efficacy.

What makes the common SAB arrangement even more difficult to rehearse, is that the sopranos are usually given the melody, which is most often times the easiest part to hear. The altos are frequently given a harmony, with which they likely have ample experience singing. The few males in this ensemble, the ones singing a less familiar harmony with voices that are likely undergoing voice change, could consequently drift away from their part in favor of the melody within their comfortable range or worse yet, to sing monotone within this comfortable range.

Could it ever be appropriate for a director to pair SAB music with their out-of-balance ensemble? Of course, the answer is yes, but it usually only works in very specific situations. As stated above, directors should check off the technical criteria first. Can the singers physically sing the music? The only way for the director to know this is by having a clear understanding of the individual vocal development that is happening in the room. The director must also know exactly what pitches the males in the room can sing beautifully. If those pitches align with the SAB arrangement, then yes, this music could work. Keep in mind two things: (1) vocal ranges during this time change frequently, and (2) even though the music works for the ensemble based upon technical criteria, Emily Crocker warns that this music could still sound empty and unblended due to a wide pitch gap.¹⁸

There are alternatives to SAB literature for the out-of-balance ensemble, and that often includes males with changing voices. For example, the Cambiata Press is one such publisher whose mission includes providing "quality music for early adolescent choirs with changing voices," and music that "fits choirs with fewer males than females."¹⁹ Included in their various choral offerings are selections specifically arranged and crafted to accommodate the males undergoing voice change. Instead of SATB, you'd see SACB. The C designation represents cambiata voices: the males undergoing voice change. As with any other potential repertoire selection, these pieces must also undergo the same level of scrutiny. Publishers and music providers that offer this type of specialized repertoire are certainly helpful, but in the end, an out-of-balance ensemble may require still other options for their repertoire needs.

In the case of an ensemble that is too out of balance to support independent tenor and bass sections, a good option would be to seek out two- and three-part treble literature. This option allows the director the freedom to arrange the piece to best fit the individual needs of the singers. As compared to SAB literature, the director must ask themselves, what would be easier and more rewarding for the males in an out-of-balance ensemble, of which some may still be undergoing voice change? Is it singing the melody or simple harmony in their individual workable range, or a designated harmony a sixth or more below the melody that may also be outside their range? By seeking two- and three-part literature with the understanding that the director can be flexible in adapting the parts, the males can sing any combination of the following: the melody down an octave, a simple arranged ostinato designed to fit the limited range of a chang-

ing voice, an alto part in the chest voice of an unchanged voice, or they could use their high voice and sing the soprano or alto part in their falsetto.

Of course, making these kinds of adaptations to the music is more easily done in a two-part rather than a four-part piece. The creative director, with a little bit of harmonic analysis, could easily adjust any two- and three-part piece to fit the comfortable range of their intended singers. Henry Leck offers some guidelines to help sort out the basic ranges of males with changing or newly changed voices for the director who is new to adapting parts to fit the needs of singers. He states that newly changed voices who can still access their falsetto can sing in the treble staff. If he's using his new chest voice, D to G within the bass staff (D3 – G3) is normally most comfortable. This melodic interval of a perfect fourth, clearly highlights the limited range of the male with a newly changed voice.

Singing across the break (D4 – F4) is rather difficult for newly changed voices. It has been observed that males singing here without the time to develop proper technique will often sing well below the pitch, chins may raise, they might use a shouting or pressed tone, or they'll possibly use tension instead of air to sing. Sadly, some males will drop their voices into a comfortable monotone range, singing neither the melody nor assigned harmony, and not even know they're doing it. Unfortunately, as stated above, SAB literature frequently places the baritone part either in or within very close proximity to the singer's break.²⁰

Arranging Literature to Fit your Ensemble

Such a class cannot progress unless there is a teacher who is experienced, adaptable, and innovative. A teacher must be able to transpose, play a tonic sol-fa chording in any key, manufacture a simple descant, even write out a three-part arrangement of a favorite song.²¹

Once the director has selected a piece for their choir and is acutely aware of the individual comfortable ranges of their singers, they can then go about the process of making adaptations that best fit the needs of the intended singers. Often it's best to start with the simplest of solutions: assigning singers to different voice parts. Bass singers, even if only a few are present, would be far better served if they double the soprano line down in their octave and within their

healthy singing range. This placement will reinforce the melody rather than drawing attention to an unbalanced separate bass line. The males with unchanged voices or stronger falsettos can double the soprano two at pitch, and the ones currently going through voice change can often double the alto part at pitch in their chest voice.²²

These decisions can solve many of the director's problems but must be made in accordance with the demand of the repertoire, the abilities of the students, the number of males, and their comfortable ranges. Once the director opens themselves up to this kind of creativity, a whole new world of SA/2-part and SSA/3-part literature becomes available.

The duet, *Wir eilen mit schwachen* (Figure 1 on the next page), from J. S. Bach's cantata "Jesu, der du meine Seele" provides an excellent opportunity to pair voices in unbalanced choirs. It is a fun polyphonic piece where the singers can divide on both parts, as needed. Academically, this piece allows the students to learn about Baroque polyphony and melismatic practices. As an added bonus, the polyphonic texture of the music tends to mask that both the males and females are singing together. The duet *Abendlied* (Figure 2 on page 16), this one by Felix Mendelssohn, is another example of where voice pairing can be used to place the males on parts that keep them singing in a comfortable range. In addition to exposing the singers to the German language, this example also helps to develop the ability to sing long melodic phrases that sit nicely in their healthy and comfortable singing range.

Arranging three-part treble literature provides more flexibility for placing tenors and basses of varying ranges and adds complexity for the sopranos and altos who are ready for the challenge. As a general rule of thumb, place the sopranos and the tenors who are comfortable singing around middle C on the top line. The second line would be for the soprano twos and basses in their own octave. Finally, place the altos and tenors who can sing with ease above middle C on the third line (Figure 3 on page 16).

Conclusion

We must do our best to be affirming and encouraging to maintain our students' overall singing self-efficacy. Despite all our best efforts, intentions, and careful planning, singers in our program may still have moments of frustration and disappointment. When this occurs, engage them in the learning process and use your supportive community to lift them up. By continually staying up-to-date on the latest vocal

Men double women

Texture masks the voice pairing

15

Figure 1. Johann Sebastian Bach, *Jesu, der du meine Seele*, BWV 78, 1724, mm. 7–18.

Choral Public Domain Library

Tenors sing with the Sopranos and Basses sing with the Altos

S
T

Wenn ich auf dem Lager lie - ge, in Nacht ge -

A
B

Wenn ich auf dem Lager lie - ge, in Nacht ge -

p

Long phrases lying mostly in the middle of the voice

S
T

hüllt, so schwebt mir vor ein sü - - - sses, an mu - tig lie - bes

A
B

hüllt, so schwebt mir vor ein sü - - - sses, an mu - tig lie - bes

f *dim.*

f *dim.*

dim.

ped. *

Figure 2. Felix Mendelssohn, *Abendlied*, mm. 5–13.

Choral Public Domain Library

Poco animato

Soprano 1 and lower Tenors

At - que sem - per vir - go, Fe - lix coe - li por - ta.

Soprano 2 and Basses

At - que sem - per vir - go, Fe - lix coe - li por - ta, coe - li por - ta.

Altos and higher Tenors

At - que sem - per vir - go, Fe - lix coe - li por - ta, coe - li por - ta.

mf cresc. *f* *p*

mf cresc. *f* *p*

mf cresc. *f* *p*

Figure 3. Edvard Grieg, *Ave maris stella*, 1898-1899, mm. 5–10.

Choral Public Domain Library

developments and comfortable singing ranges, you will have the confidence to choose valuable repertoire that is suited to your ensemble's needs. By arranging these selections as needed, and even engaging students creatively, choral singing during voice change or with an out-of-balance ensemble will remain a rewarding and life-changing endeavor.

You may be interested in the following *ChorTeach* articles on the topic of male recruitment:

“Male Chorus: Recruit, Maintain, and Develop” by Mark Cotter; Vol 3. Issue 3, Spring 2011.

“Recruiting Boys into Choirs—Techniques that Work” by Jonathan Krinke; Vol 6. Issue 4, Summer 2014.

“Mission Impossible? or How Best to Recruit and Retain Junior High Male Chorus Members” by Suzanne Callahan; Vol 8. Issue 2, Winter 2016.

“Recruiting and Retention Ideas for Beginning High School Choral Directors” by Lorraine Lynch; Vol 12. Issue 2, Winter 2020.

NOTES

¹ A discussion of gender and sex are beyond the scope of this particular article. The terms men/male and women/female refer to cisgender singers who identify with their birth-assigned sex.

² For purposes of this article, an “out-of-balance ensemble” refers to an ensemble with a higher ratio of female singers to male singers.

³ For one example, see: J. T. Gates, “A Historical Comparison of Public Singing by American Men and Women” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 37, no. 1 (1989): 32–47. In many cases throughout the United States, it's possible to see a ratio of female to male singers in middle school and high school choirs around 5-2. See also: “Engaging Boys—Overcoming Stereotypes: Another Look at the Missing Males in Vocal Programs,” by Scott D. Harrison (September 2004) : 24.

⁴ Frederick Swanson, “Changing Voices: Don't Leave out the Boys” *Music Educators Journal*, 70, no. 5 (1984): 47–50.

⁵ Chloe Veltman, “Boys to Men: Singing Through Voice Change”

The Voice, 34, no. 4 (Summer, 2011): 5.

⁶ Albert Bandura, *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1986), 391.

⁷ T. R. George & D.L. Feltz, “Motivation in sport from a collective efficacy perspective” *International Journal of Sports Psychology* 26 (1995): 98-116.

⁸ Albert Bandura, “Perceived self-efficacy in the exercise of personal agency” *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology* 2 (1990): 128-163.

⁹ Henry Leck, “The Boy's Expanding Voice” *Choral Journal* (May 2009): 49-60.

¹⁰ Steven Demorest and Ann Clements, “Factors Influencing the Pitch-Matching of Junior High Boys” *Journal of Research in Music Education* vol. 55, no. 3 (Autumn 2007), 190.

¹¹ John Sloboda, et al., “Quantifying tone deafness in the general population,” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* vol. 1060 (2005): 255-61.

¹² Ann Clements, “The Importance of Selected Variables in Predicting Student Participation in Junior High Choir” (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Washington, 2002).

¹³ Michele Holt and James Jordan, *The School Choral Program: Philosophy, Planning, Organizing, and Teaching* (Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc, 2008), 363.

¹⁴ Alan McClung, “Strategies to Develop Pitch Matching Skills in the Singer with Inconsistent Pitch,” Cambiata Institute, accessed October 7, 2020, <http://cambiatainstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/The-Inconsistent-Pitch-Singer.pdf>.

¹⁵ Henry Leck, “The Boy's Expanding Voice,” *Choral Journal* (May 2009): 49-60.

¹⁶ Rebecca Reams, “High School Choral Directors' Description of Appropriate Literature for Beginning High School Choirs,” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 49, no. 2 (2001): 122-135.

¹⁷ John Cooksey, “The Development of a Contemporary Eclectic Theory for the Training and Cultivation of the Junior High School Male Changing Voice. Part 4: Selecting Music,” *Choral Journal* 18, no. 5 (January 1978): 6.

¹⁸ Emily Crocker, “Choosing Music for Middle School Choirs,” *Music Educators Journal* 86, no.4 (2000): 33–37.

¹⁹ “Cambiata Press Mission,” Cambiata Press, accessed January 8, 2021, <http://cambiatapress.com/>.

²⁰ Henry Leck, “The Boy's Expanding Voice.”

²¹ Frederick Swanson, “Changing Voices: Don't Leave out the Boys,” *Music Educators Journal* 70, no. 5 (1984): 47–50.

²² Judy Bowers, “Building Early Choral Experiences – Part 2,” in *The School Choral Program* (GIA Publications, 2008): 365-67.