

Obtaining optimum potential from the young singer can be an exciting challenge. Even though choral music is often slighted in junior-high schools, excellence in choral singing for that age group can be achieved if the teacher realizes that: 1) the junior-high-school student willingly and eagerly responds to motivation and enthusiasm, 2) the junior-high-school student is one of the most appreciative persons of any age group, 3) the junior-high-school age is the most crucial time to avoid breaking the continuum of vocal interest and development in young voices, and 4) the junior-high-school student can achieve whatever standard of excellence is insisted upon by the teacher.

Choral excellence in junior-high-school choirs can be realized through a combination of use of good literature, training toward good sight-reading skills, development of good vocal production, insistence on good musicianship from the individual student, and tremendous output of energy both from the students and the teacher. The combination of all of these ingredients is essential to begin to tap the optimum potential of the young singer and to stir a continuing interest toward further vocal participation and development.

Vocal Production

The following vocal techniques must continuously be used in conjunction with good literature both to enhance and to expedite musical development. Although the suggestions presented are in reference to the junior-high-school age, the techniques are applicable to most choral singing.

Good tone quality and vocal production must be the most essential goals of the singer's education. Great care needs to be taken with the young voice to prevent damage. A combination of a diaphragmatic pulsation technique, facial space, and downward movement of vocal exercises seems to create a mature, free, and vibrant sound with a strong degree of technical facility. The pulsation technique is the base of the pyramid; it is the breath-support device, the controlled diaphragmatic vibrato. It also gives energy to any given length of sound.

Begin by having the student "hoot" like an owl five times consecutively, very short and crisp. Make certain the "hoot" is energetic enough to involve the diaphragm. Have the student place

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Junior-High Choirs:

The Sky's the Limit

by Sally Herman

a hand in that area as a reminder. Do not allow any kind of a grunting to take place, as it will cause the sensation of "pushing down" rather than "lifting up." Next begin your series of exercises, remembering that to keep them in a downward motion prevents problems with the chest voice.

Exaggerate in the beginning. By starting on a very high pitch, the boys will soon find how to use falsetto. Proceed by working the falsetto downward, trying to carry that voice as low as possible rather than forcing the fuller voice into the upper register. Handle the chest voice of the girls with equal concern.

In the following exercise, both male and female voices should sing on actual pitch (Figure 1A). Move the exercise downward either by half steps or whole steps. For variation, try singing descending triads rather than five-note scales (Figure 1B). Use a good strong push from the diaphragm on each "wh" attack of the word "who." Work everything from the standpoint of eighth-note pulses.

hold his breath at the same time the pulse movement is being created from the diaphragm in order to achieve the continuation of sound and support. Keep the rib cage lifted by attaching an imaginary string to the point that the ribs form just below the throat. Pull that string in an upward motion and allow the ribs to follow accordingly.

Breath support can be obtained without the tension caused when young singers pull in around the mid-section as the inhalation process takes place. Eventually have the students run the "oo" sounds together enough to form a controlled, liquid vibrato rather than separated pulses. Hold the sound on the "oo" vowel and interrupt it only with the short puffs of air that are created in the diaphragmatic area with the pulse sensation (Figure 2C).

Facial Space

The next section of the pyramid is facial space. This space includes the outer facial structure as well as the in-

Figure 1A

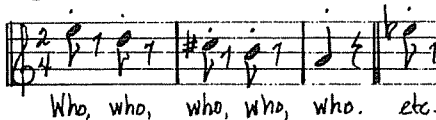
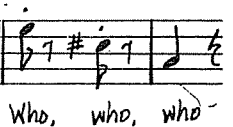


Figure 1B



The next step is to achieve continuous breath flow and pulse movements by connecting each moving "oo" sound without the aspirant "wh." Insist that the students use the pulsation of the diaphragm to put a sharp attack on each note (Figure 2A).

side of the mouth. Try to create as much space in the back of the mouth as is comfortable. At the same time, sing with as much vertical elongation of the facial structure as is possible without tension.

Exercises and choices of words

Figure 2A

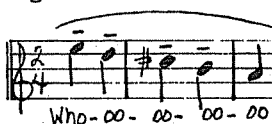


Figure 2B

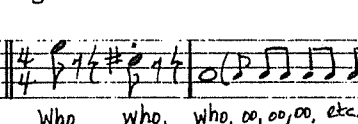


Figure 2C

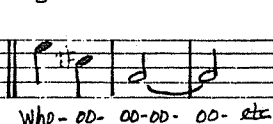


Figure 2B illustrates an exercise that uses the fundamental process to achieve support on a longer note. The eighth-note pulse is used more mentally than physically. At this point the student must also have the feeling of trying to

should be designed to create relaxed movement of muscles. Rather than say "drop the jaw," you might want to say "lift the top back teeth." The end result is a dropped jaw that is relaxed rather than tense. The choice of phrase also

alludes more accurately to the facial space technique to be discussed.

Remember that any of the following processes are assumed to have the pulsation technique employed in conjunction with them at all times. In order to create space within the mouth, it must first be created facially. Begin by having the student lift the eyebrows as far away from the mouth as possible. If you simply say "lift the brows," the cushions under the eyes and the nasal passages will not be as readily involved. One concept that seems to work well

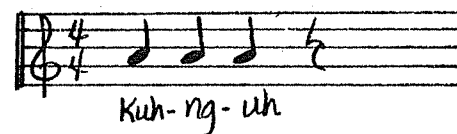
with the young singer is to sense all feeling of opening the mouth as occurring above the jaw rather than of pushing the jaw into position.

Several exercises can be used to develop the feeling of facial space. Working from the "ah" vowel seems to quicken results and make the shift into other vowel sounds smoother. Begin by having the student say, "Mama mia," with great exuberance! Do not allow the corners of the mouth to pull back on the "ee" sound of "mia." Keep the space vertical. Make certain that students are

aware of the facial structure involved inside and out. Once the energy and enthusiasm can be seen in the face, as well as heard, proceed to the next exercise.

To achieve the needed space at the back of the mouth, say the word "kuh," close to an "ng," and go back to the "uh," all in one continuous breath (Figure 3). The change in the throat can immediately be felt. Make the student aware that the wider, open feeling first felt on "kuh" is the goal for every vowel sound they produce.

Figure 3



Once the inner mouth space has been provided, nasality problems, which occur frequently in young singers, are alleviated because the blockage has been removed.

The next exercise (Figure 4A) combines vowel space and the pulsation technique. When changing from "kuh" to any other vowel, concentrate on feeling the facial space and throat space that is present with "kuh." Change the throat area as little as possible. Change first from "uh" to "ah," a vowel with which it is easy to maintain facial space. Then proceed to other vowels.

Movement on the exercises is best served when first moving the entire exercise up a minor third and then down a step. This avoids psychological strain in the ascending patterns. On exercises Figures 4A and 4B, the pulsation technique must be employed on the "kah-ah-ah," "kee-ee-ee," etc. Do not allow the student to use the aspirant. Insist on the pulsation movement from the diaphragm. The "kah," "kee," or any

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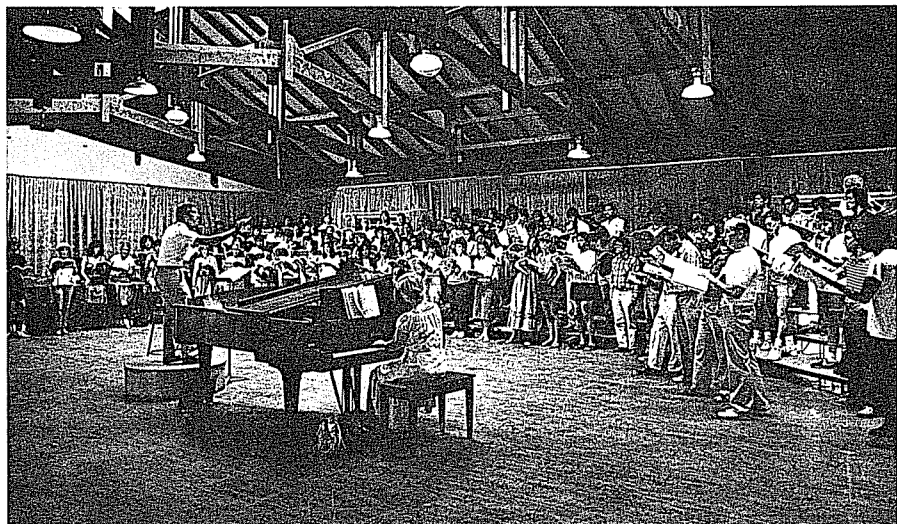
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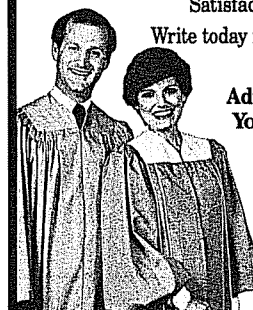


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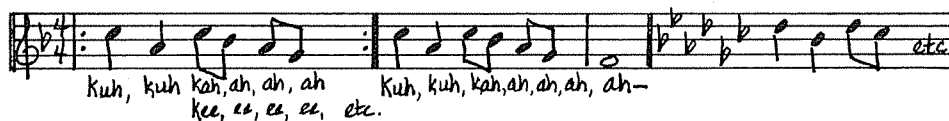
other vowel should feel as open in the back of the mouth as the "kuh."

literature. Include in your yearly program literature that demands vocal

and function of breath control and basic vocal production.

Figure 4A

Figure 4B



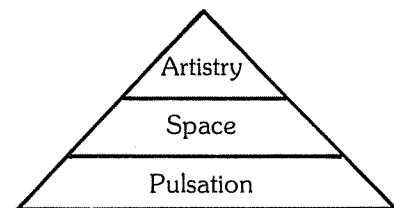
Once the sensation of facial space has been firmly implanted, sing each vowel on a single pitch preceded with the consonant m, trying to make the vowel feel that it has the vertical elongation of the "ah." By singing vowels in the order of "mah, moh, moo, may, mee," that relationship can be strongly sensed. Consider "mah, moh, moo" as one group and "may, mee" as a second group, needing a little more nasal space. You might want to suggest that students try to feel slightly more height in the nasal passage on "may" and "mee."

You cannot construct pulse or space without the use of vibrant energy, and application should be to the use of good

techniques such as control of sustained passages, unison singing with its intonation problems, some technically difficult passages to teach clarity, etc. Make certain that your students are not just learning to sing a song but are learning to sing!

Vocal Artistry

Once the practices of good vocal production have been established, we may add the top section of the pyramid—vocal artistry. The uppermost sections of the pyramid obviously cannot be constructed without the formation of the base: proper knowledge



Vocal artistry is a combination of vocal skill and a stylistic sense of how to implement that skill in singing the literature. For purposes of basic understanding relative to the young singer, artistry will be defined in terms of the following components:

1. Formation of a line
 - a. Vowel and consonant relationships
 - b. Syllable stress
 - c. Word stress
 - d. Dynamics
2. Musical style and form
 - a. Varied use of pulsation technique
 - b. Cadence stress and finality

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- c. Dynamics as they relate to style
- d. Emotion of the text

Formation of a line is simply not going to occur as a result of a breath taken in a certain place or the rise and fall of a dynamic level, important as those factors are. For the young singer who has not yet developed musical sense or taste, the basic, perhaps somewhat mechanical, procedure for expressing text must be explained. To tell someone to sing a line musically who does not understand the language is futile.

Vowel and consonant relationships need the most immediate understanding of any of the aspects of line formation. One of the most difficult techniques to teach young singers is to hold out a note on a pure vowel sound. Inexperience and inhibition cause them to anticipate the next sound or the final consonant with a bit of impatience, the result of which is often an unwanted diphthong or a clipped word. This breaks the flow of the line. Consonants should be considered a very brief flash of light to make one aware of change. If the light is allowed to shine directly into the eye for an extended length of time, the result is damaging.

Several techniques can serve to avoid these problems. Begin by using pulsation to expand the length of the vowel and build sound at the same time. Remember that pulsation keeps the sound from starving. Build one vowel into the next with pulsation and space, allowing as little interruption as possible.

Once the idea of using pulsation to expand and lengthen the vowel sound is achieved, syllable stress should be taught. The student must learn not only primary and secondary syllable stress in formation of the line, but also placement of these nuances in a legato vocal line. Exaggeration seems to be the most effective method of introduction of a

concept to the beginner. Time and patience must therefore be spent to effect the nuance successfully. Pulsation holds the key in such development. The stressed syllable should not be attacked harshly on the consonant, but rather lifted or expanded dynamically once the vowel formation has taken place. An increase in dynamic level on the vowel is then achieved by an increase of pulsation. The stress desired on a given syllable works in direct ratio to the amount of energy with which the pulsation is delivered.

Except for special effects, unstressed syllables must fall into the formation of a line by leading to and falling away from the stressed syllable with minute graduations of dynamics. Comfortable musical effect of the syllables of each word can only be realized when nuance is subtle.

The theory of syllable stress must be carried a step further by determining the more important words of the text within each phrase. The strongest syllables are given sufficient voice inflection to interpret meaningfully the text. The gradual increase and decrease of dynamics allows the necessary rise and fall of the line. Sometimes this is determined by the direction of pitch movement, sometimes by the syllables of the text, most often by the combination of both.

The amount of syllable stress is determined largely by the style of the music. Pulsation is controlled in both width and intensity relative to the absence or presence of vibrato appropriate to the literature being performed. Renaissance literature requires the use of pulsation in a manner that makes vibrato less noticeably present. The narrow width of the high and low sides of the pulse combined with fairly rapid production of it produce the desired effect and at the same time maintain the breath control

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and energy necessary for fluency and control of the vocal line. Syllable stress must be present but with subtlety.

In Romantic music the vibrato becomes broader and slower. The pulsations demand more intensity. Syllable stress and consonants are much more exaggerated. Care must still be taken however, to make certain that expansion occurs on the vowel and that the space of the vowel is maintained throughout the expansion.

In addition to syllable stress, word stress, and dynamic control, the relationship of one phrase to another must also be considered. Dynamic levels help develop this relationship, and cadences must show degrees of finality and/or relaxation relative to their placement in the music. Degrees of ritardando, diminuendo, crescendo, and consonant explosion all play a part in creating the finality of a cadence.

The fire that lights the candle is the emotion with which the text is conveyed. The other factors discussed are meaningless without emotion. Daily discussions of text and daily practices of dissolving inhibitions related to display of emotion in music allow the young singer to begin to show skills in the area of vocal artistry. Inhibitions are dissolved largely with positive approaches to teaching. The student must realize that mistakes are not only expected but are of value. He/she must learn to feel comfortable about making mistakes. This means that the teacher must be seen as nonthreatening. Again, choice of what phrases are used in instructing sets the mood. Instead of saying, "Do this or that," try saying something like, "Why don't we try; this or that."

Junior-high-school choral singing suffers from the false perception that discipline problems make artistic performances impossible. Another common misconception is that students of that age are not mature enough to produce artistic results. Such thinking sells them short, for they are capable of choral performance every bit as good as the best older groups. All it takes is persistent attention to good vocal production, insistence on artistic creativity, use of good literature, and a positive, energetic approach to all of these factors.

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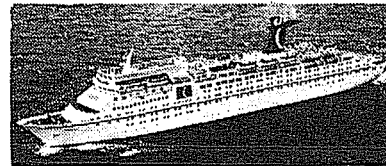
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