

The Goals of Vocalization: Developing Healthy Voices and the Potential for Expressive Singing

by John Harold Guthmiller

The process called vocalization is something of an enigma to choral conductors. Some directors rely heavily on vocalizing to develop the characteristic tonal qualities of their choirs. Some limit their vocalizing to simple "warm-ups" that have little or no long-term benefits on vocal development. Many choral musicians are skeptical about the value of vocalization and therefore avoid it whenever possible.

There are several reasons why some conductors are reluctant to incorporate systematic vocalization in their rehearsal procedures. Many have little or no background in singing and are uncomfortable with being responsible for the vocal health of their singers. For such conductors, vocalizing their choirs is indeed a burden, for it focuses the attention of the singers on what the conductor does least well. Another argument against vocalization is that it takes too much time away from actual rehearsal of the music. Those who hold this point of view usually believe that they can accomplish whatever needs to be developed vocally by practicing the music.

Both of these attitudes impose limitations on the development of choral singers. The burden of teaching good vocal habits must fall upon the choral director as heavily as it does upon the private voice teacher. This is especially true since choral directors as a group deal with so many young voices and because a great many people will never study voice outside the choral rehearsal. For a conductor who is just learning how to deal with voices, vocalization is an important tool. It allows the conductor to isolate technical problems and develop in singers an awareness of the relationship between vocal function and the expressive demands of music. For example, learning how to tune, how to articulate, how to make vocal adjustments necessary for extremely high or low pitches, how to add weight or intensity to the sound without straining, how to blend, balance, and perhaps most importantly, how to listen, are all part of the vocalization process.

The conductor who believes that much of this can be accomplished

as the music is being rehearsed has a valid point as far as it goes. But vocalization is more than simply warming-up or dealing with specific problems presented by the choir's repertoire. It is conditioning as well, and conditioning requires the total development of the instrument, not just that which is specifically called for in musical performance. To illustrate this point, it is useful to refer to the analogy between singers and athletes. What athlete trains for the sport or event by just going out and running the course a few times? When serious about training, the athlete spends months or years developing and fine-tuning the entire body, even those muscles which may be only indirectly called upon during the athletic contest. The athlete must be prepared for any eventuality, and it is through conditioning that the body is made ready.

Similarly, the singers in a choir must be conditioned to function at their highest level regardless of changing circumstances. A singer's voice may be tired, or it may have to fill a room twice as big as any in which the chorus has rehearsed. Singers also have to be ready to make adjustments to accommodate changes due to maturation. What is easy for a thirty-year old singer may be very difficult for one who is much older or younger. The only way choral singers can learn to be so flexible is through a keen awareness of their voices as functioning systems. Although they need not know the complicated theories of phonation, registration, or vowel formants to sing well, choristers can benefit significantly from their conductor's understanding of these phenomena. Through controlled vocalization the choir director can help singers develop the flexibility required to meet the expressive and stylistic demands of choral music.

Not all vocalization, however, produces positive results. All too often vocalizing becomes a means of imposing a static adjustment on voices

by forcing them to repeat day after day a series of activities which reinforces one kind of functional response while ignoring others that are equally important to the health of the voice as a whole. Like the weightlifter who single-mindedly works to develop strength by building muscles of great bulk while ignoring those exercises which give suppleness and flexibility, the singer who is forced to repeat the same scales or arpeggios indiscriminately is likely to develop an extremely limited technique. Worse, while a singer may initially show some signs of improvement by following a specific regimen, both the health and the expressive capacity of the voice will ultimately be restricted to the limits explored during vocalization. For many singers this leads to continual disappointment and eventual disaffection.

Vocalizing can only contribute to healthy vocal adjustments when the choir director realizes that no vocalise has any real intrinsic value. The worth of a particular exercise can only be measured in terms of its ability to elicit a correct response to a distinct concept of pitch, intensity, and vowel.¹ Furthermore, what works one day may not work the next. One must also recognize that in a choral situation, where there are many individual voices, a vocalise that appears to help the choir may in fact only be helping a few of the singers. The conductor must therefore listen very carefully and vary the contents of his vocalization as much as possible. Variety is critical because using the same vocalises all the time contributes to mental and physical laziness in the singers. These conditions are antithetical to good singing and are diametrically opposed to the objectives for which vocalization is practiced, e.g., the development of freedom and awareness.

Some forms of vocalizing can even be harmful. One example is the often employed choral warm-up

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which calls for vigorous and repeated staccato attacks with emphasis on "using the diaphragm" for support. It is not the staccato itself that is objectionable, for some staccato singing can be helpful in training the extrinsic musculature of the larynx. Rather it is the emphasis on a strong diaphragmatic attack that causes problems. While such exercises may appear to improve the vitality of the singing, the rigidity that repeated heavy staccato singing imparts to the whole respiratory system can never result in a truly free and well-resonated tone. In-

deed, some noted authorities even consider this kind of exercise to be dangerous to the vocal cords.²

For the choral director who chooses to teach voice in rehearsals there are many pitfalls. Vocalization, when practiced carelessly or wrongfully, can do as much damage as it has the potential to do good. This is, perhaps, the reason some choral directors are reluctant to accept vocal problems as part of their responsibility. The choral director who has a basic understanding of the ways in which the voice functions, and who realizes that good

singing requires more than simple or platitudinous solutions to functional problems, has taken the first step in the process of developing an attitude toward the teaching of vocal techniques that is dynamic and ultimately helpful. What must be done to follow this first step is continue to refine one's understanding of the principles of physiology and acoustics that apply to singing. From this understanding devise a plan to influence positively the vocal development of the choir. Despite all the pitfalls, the most efficient means by which such a plan can be enacted is through regular and diverse vocalization.

The precise goal of such vocalization should be to aid in the development of healthy, well-conditioned voices which do not suffer from interfering tensions. Voices in such a state should have the capacity to:

- (1) Sing comfortably through a range of at least two octaves
- (2) Sing with accurate intonation
- (3) Maintain a steady vibrato, which is regular in both rate and amplitude, and which does not draw attention to itself unduly
- (4) Resonate all pitches effectively
- (5) Change the coloring of vowels from brighter to darker or from darker to brighter without disturbing the other qualities of the tone
- (6) Produce an effective legato
- (7) Sing with dramatic intensity
- (8) Sing with some measure of agility
- (9) Maintain stamina and vocal "freshness"³

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It is the thesis of this article that vocal instruction in the choral rehearsal should be undertaken with the primary objective of developing all nine of the qualities listed above. The precise vocalises or drills that a conductor may choose to effect any of these qualities will vary according to the vocal condition of the singers, the nature of the music to be sung, and most importantly, the conductor's skill in hearing and diagnosing vocal problems. This last particular, that of the conductor's aural and analytical skills, is dependent upon a knowledge of the principles of physiology and acoustics that appertain to the singing process. Fortunately, these principles are becoming more and more accessible through literature and through a host of workshops and clinics presented around the country each year.

If choral conductors are to successfully employ vocalization to produce better choral singing, they must have a relentless curiosity about the mysteries which surround singing. They should be ready and willing to experiment, albeit carefully, and to admit failure or being wrong. Nothing is more dangerous than the vocal pedagogue who insists on proving a point at the expense of some hapless and often helpless singer. Finally, the choral director must always remember that no one aspect of vocal technique is an end unto itself. Whether the choir is working in the area of breathing, registration, or resonance, it is but one factor in a complex equation. No matter how well this one factor is mastered, the solution to the equation will not be correct unless the other factors are also correct.

Good singing, however, is more than a sum of good vocal techniques. True artistry is born of the ability to respond at will and in a

variety of ways to musical and emotional stimuli. The choral director has the opportunity to teach vocal artistry. No lesser goal should be acceptable.

Footnotes

¹ Cornelius L. Reid, *The Free Voice: A Guide to Natural Singing* (New York: Joseph Patelson Music House, 1974), p. 187.

² William Vennard, *Singing: The Mechanism and the Technique*, 5th ed. (New York: Carl Fischer, 1968), p. 31.

³ These criteria have been distilled by the author from the materials in the bibliography. The list itself was developed under the guidance of Barbara Doscher of the University of Colorado.

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