



ON THE VOICE

SHARON HANSEN, EDITOR

Choral Directors Are from Mars and Voice Teachers Are from Venus: “Sing from the Diaphragm” and Other Vocal Mistructions

Part 2

by

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Editor's note: Part 1 ran in May 2014. This two-part article is based upon information presented by the five authors in lectures at the 2009 ACDA National Conference in Oklahoma City, OK; the 2010 NATS National Conference in Salt Lake City, UT; the 2011 ACDA National Conference in Chicago, IL; and the 2012 ACDA Eastern Division Conference in Providence, RI. In these lectures, each of the presenters was asked to speak on topics of his/her expertise. This article is a summary of their presentations. The first in the “Choral Directors Are from Mars and Voice Teachers Are from Venus” series can be found in the April 2012 issue of *Choral Journal*.

Textual Issues

(Allen Henderson, author)

Mistruction #7:

“Enunciate! I want to hear all those consonants!” (Hyperdiction/Hyperconsonants)

This ambiguous statement leaves singers wondering if the conductor really means every consonant. Final consonants? Initial consonants? Internal consonants? Many singers respond to this type of generic suggestion by increasing jaw movement, resulting in a compromise of the purity of the vowel sound. (They increase jaw movement rather than increase the use of the articulators.) They may also overcompensate in other ways, such as with the articulators, causing those speech organs to become stressed or tense; or with the support system, which impedes ideal breath flow.

We all have heard choirs and solo singers whose mission in life seems limited to placing emphasis on every consonant in every word they sing as

loudly as they possibly can. This hyperdiction approach is more appropriate in larger ensembles accompanied by orchestras, such as symphonic choruses, and any ensemble performing in wet acoustics. How about a more specific and clear statement such as, “Make sure your final consonants are clearly articulated and rhythmically energized.” Such a statement should be backed up by a conscious system in which your singers understand the rhythmic context in which you want them to articulate.

Mistruction #8:

“Write in your music that the A is like ‘AH’ as in ‘Father.’”

Clear diction involves a corporate understanding of all vowel and consonant symbols and how to employ those sounds in a concise, rhythmic context. All members of ACDA and NATS should work toward using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) as the standard system rather than the various, cryptic systems of individuals for the following reasons:

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- It is the internationally recognized standard.
- It is valuable for high school students to be exposed to it prior to college diction courses.
- It works in both the choral and studio settings.
- It is used successfully by many church choirs and choirs full of avocational singers.
- It works with various languages. Students are able to see correlations between uses of a particular sound in various languages.

There are many resources available for use in voice and choral classrooms, such as IPA wall charts that can be hung on bulletin boards¹, online websites for transcription², and computer fonts.³ The *Choral Journal Index* lists thirty-five articles on various aspects of diction; a few apply specifically to the use of IPA in the rehearsal. The *NATS Journal of Singing* has a regular column on diction issues. Additional articles on diction can be accessed by searching the *Journal of Singing Index*.⁴

Mistruction #9:

"Everyone sing a pure [i] vowel!"

This is not by itself a controversial statement unless the sopranos and/or tenors are on a high G or A. This leads us to the discussion of vowel purity/modification in relation to tessitura. With certainty, we can state that one size does not fit all. Sopranos modify vowels differently from tenors. Often teachers and choir directors believe it simpler to instruct their singers to use one mouth

and tongue shape for all vowels. Regarding such a method, Richard Miller states: "[P]ernicious is the technique of distorting all the vowels throughout the range by assuming some one ideal mouth and pharynx posture through which all vowels must then be produced."⁵ This is not productive as a method.

Berton Coffin wrote, "There is no disputing the fact that modification of vowels inspires much controversy. However, the conviction that modification of vowels is unnecessary does betray a certain ignorance. It is true that singers can sing any note on any vowel, limited only by the physical boundaries of their range, but some vowel forms will have constructive interaction with the vocal cords (aid and amplify their air pressures), and other vowel forms will have a diminishing acoustical interaction (distort and diminish the cords' air pressures). A bad tone fights with itself; that is, two vibrators interact badly with each other. For example, in stringed instruments the conflict is between a string and the resonator; in the organ the conflict is between the reed and pipe. In the voice, the conflict is between the vocal cords and the vocal tract."⁶

Vowel modification requires *specific* solutions for each voice section. For example, as voices approach their *passaggio* singing the vowel [i], modification is needed toward [I] or in some cases [E]. Therefore, depending on the voicing of a chord, some sections may be quite comfortable singing the pure [i] while others will have to modify. The sensitive choral conductor will ensure that their score study includes solutions that ensure singers are able to adjust in this manner.

Formant/Resonance Issues

(Scott McCoy, author)

Mistruction #10:

"I want absolutely no vibrato throughout this entire piece."

For many years, the dominant choral sound paradigm has relied on minimal or no vibrato, especially in the highest voice parts (this model also is common in solo singing for early music). Often, adult women are expected to sing in a timbre that closely resembles the unchanged voice of a boy soprano. This timbral sleight of hand is easily accomplished by some singers but poses nearly insurmountable technical challenges for others. When performed incorrectly, suppression of vibrato can quickly lead to vocal fatigue and might even trigger the development of laryngeal pathologies. But as the great Robert Shaw was known to say, vibrato should never confuse the pitch. He might have been speaking specifically about choral singing, but the statement is equally applicable to solo singers and instrumentalists. A scholarly approach to this issue is dependent on the reason minimal vibrato is desired. Often, it comes in response to stylistic considerations; clearly, a Palestrina motet must be approached with different vocalism than a Verdi opera aria. However, the physical characteristics of the singer whose voice is suited to Palestrina are likely as different from those of a Wagnerian as a virginal is from a modern Steinway, yet we do not expect those two instruments to play all repertoire written for the keyboard. Perhaps we should think about singing in the same way.

In post-Baroque music, vibrato is often seen as the great disrupter of intonation. Many scholars are unconvinced,



however, that singing in tune is best accomplished with a straight tone; the orchestra of the New York Philharmonic performs with nearly perfect intonation in spite of the fact that the entire string section employs nearly continuous vibrato. In singing, both choral and solo, intonation problems do not result from vibrato, but they certainly can be made worse by *bad* vibrato, especially if it is overly wide, too slow, or too fast. The solution? Sing well. Vibrato problems often can be traced to imbalanced breath support or excess tension in the muscles of articulation. When these technical deficiencies are corrected, the vibrato usually assumes its normal role in the background of vocal timbre. In ensembles, we can encourage singers to produce an easy, free tone; to sing optimal vowels; and to listen to and merge with the voices of the other singers.

Eighteen- to twenty-two-year-old women are *not* eight-year-old boys. For some reason, the eight- to twelve-year-old boy sound is prevalent today throughout the American choral psyche, whether collegiate choral ensembles or professional. There are inherent problems with this sound:

- Tiredness occurs quickly.
- Vibrato should never confuse the pitch. (Robert Shaw)
- Orchestras manage to play in tune with vibrato and would probably sound out of tune without it.

What can we do instead of imposing no vibrato?

- Verify the vowel
- Breathe together

- Utilize an orchestral approach that uses different combinations of voices for different pieces
- Audition the choir *then* choose the repertoire!

Mistructions #11:

“Raise your eyebrows so you will sing in tune.”

“Drop your jaw.”

“Keep your tongue down.”

Lack of specificity with these instructions is a problem. For example, what part of the tongue does one “keep down”? The tip? Middle? Back? Often singers depress the tongue when given this instruction, which is incorrect. There simply are no “one size fits all” instructions for good singing. No two people share the same body; the breathing method that optimizes singing for one might completely stifle the voice of another. Nowhere is this truer than for resonance. To produce a scale with well-balanced resonance requires subtle changes to the shape of the vocal tract with every change of semitone. Fixing

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ON THE VOICE

the vocal tract in an unchanging position, whether by holding the jaw open "two fingers" or requiring the tongue to lie flat, is rather like a broken clock: time will be correct only twice a day. A few pitches will resonate well, but most will not.

Misunderstandings about resonance, and particularly formants, are rampant in the singing community, both from singing teachers and conductors. This is apparent in the dogged pursuit of pure vowels when the sung pitch rises above about F5. At this point, the pitch (fundamental frequency) is significantly higher than the formants (resonances) that are responsible for vowel creation.

No matter how hard a singer tries, it becomes impossible to produce vowel sounds that have phonetic clarity. The solution is to substitute a vowel that is acoustically possible to sing. To put this rule in concise terms, between F5 and A5, all vowels quickly merge into [a]. Acknowledging this acoustic fact permits both intonation and vocal beauty to improve.

Another common problem is the misapplication of the singer's formant (Fs), which is not necessarily ubiquitous in fine singing. For Fs to do its job of amplifying harmonics in the 2.3–3.2kHz range, a couple of things must happen: 1) the larynx must be allowed to float

freely in its resting position with no squeeze of the surrounding muscles (the epiglottis might gently fold over into the acoustic stream to narrow the laryngeal outlet); and 2) the glottis must produce a sound with sufficient amplitude in the higher harmonics to give them a chance to be boosted by the resonance of Fs. To reduce the impact of Fs, as is often desirable for the sake of a unified choral sound, one or both of these elements must be modified: the larynx will be elevated and/or the muscles around it tightened; the glottis will be partially abducted during phonation, increasing the spectral slope and attenuating high harmonics (but also adding shear forces



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to vocal fold oscillation, which can lead to injury).

New choral traditions, especially in the Scandinavian and European models, often speak to embracing, rather than attenuating, Fs. The acoustic spectrum of such ensembles—determined through a process of spectrum averaging—does in fact show a bloom of acoustic energy in the singer's formant region, much as is seen in a solo voice. However, the energy in that region falls off by >20dB from the peak intensity at lower frequency. In solo singers, this attenuation at Fs also occurs but is usually only about 10dB and can be even less. Consider instead saying: "Tune your vowels to optimize clarity and resonance."

Stamina of the Voice Issues

(Donald Simonson, author)

Mistruction #12:

"We are going to spend the entire lesson/rehearsal today singing everything on [du], [di], or [da]." (Pick one!)

Prolonged singing on an unvarying vowel creates problems of tension. As an athletic endeavor, beautiful singing demands flexible coordination between the muscles and organs of phonation. Repeating a single gesture over and over stresses those structures and inhibits their coordinated function. Imagine spending an entire one-hour workout session at the gym performing only squats. Rather than spend the entire lesson/rehearsal singing on [di], choose a variety of gestures and do not spend too much time on any single exercise or gesture or in any single range of the voice. Variety will help balance the instrument and develop flexibility and growth.

Mistruction #13:

"We will have a rehearsal Friday evening from 7–9, Saturday from 10–12 and then a dress rehearsal with orchestra from 1–3, and our concert will start at 4."

This sort of schedule is not uncommon, but overuse is abuse. Even under ideal circumstances and employing faultless technique, too much singing can be harmful. Imagine running a marathon on Friday evening to prepare for another marathon on Saturday. In addition, we must remember that we are working with young voices that often are at their peak in stamina and their ability to recover. We are instilling rehearsal habits that few will be able to maintain in later years. What was taxing at eighteen produces slight hoarseness at twenty-two. That same amount of usage might create debilitating vocal edema at thirty, and at forty might be career threatening. We must be good stewards of our student's gifts. Vocal resources are finite, and all voices are unique. Some are more robust and others are more fragile. Some are more technically developed than others, and some are more mature. What is possible with one voice may be quite impossible with another. In very general terms, for most students, two or more hours of singing per day is possible. However, we must remember that singing represents only a portion of our students' daily voice use. Again, overuse is abuse.

Warm-Up / Cooldown Issues

(Brenda Smith, author)

Mistruction #14:

"Warm-ups take too much rehearsal time. The choir should come ready to sing."

"Singing the hymns for Sunday is a good way to warm up. Once everyone has arrived, we can cut right to the anthems."

There are numerous problems with the commonplace, highly rhythmic warm-ups that allow no time for low, efficient breath. Often, the conductor is seated at the piano, playing virtuosic, melismatic |23454321 scales higher and higher for warm-ups without knowledge of what that particular warm-up is designed to do. In the college or university setting, it is also counterproductive to have graduate students, who may know little vocal pedagogy and therefore have no idea why they are doing the specific warm-up they are doing, warming up the choir. Warm-ups and cooldowns are as necessary to singers as they are to athletes. Both are best done unaccompanied, using the piano as a harmonic support only. Warm-ups adjust the posture of the voice from speech to song and center the body, mind, and spirit. Cooldowns assist the voice in returning from a singing posture to one for speech.

Warm-ups need not be longer than five to seven minutes. There should be a goal to any warm-up. Vocal technical instructions for each exercise should be clear. Feedback should be given at each repetition. Effective warm-ups address the vocal technical problems in the music to be sung. Warm-up activities should cover the four basic steps toward healthy singing: relaxation, posture, breathing, and resonance. As stated in *Choral Pedagogy*, 3rd ed., "Warm-up procedures should build the vocal instrument by eliminating tension, establishing good posture, activating the breathing mechanism, and encouraging healthy tone production."⁷

Because singing demands the mental acumen and physical agility of any athletic activity, relaxation of the mind and spirit as well as muscles of each singer

ON THE VOICE

must be addressed systematically. A singer's posture must be achieved—one that balances the body in a position of buoyant expectancy. For rehearsal purposes, a healthy seated posture must be established.⁹ To serve as a positive role model, the choral conductor should present with a relaxed but firm body posture at all times.

The first step in teaching *breath management* is the relaxation of the abdominal muscles. The choir should be invited to exhale first, thus creating the need for a comfortable, deep inhalation of air. The sensations of resonances can be evoked through patterns involving sighing, humming, lip trills, or voiced con-

tinuing consonants such as [r], [v], or [z]. Descending patterns that begin slightly above the speaking range will awaken the lighter, lyric vocal quality desired. A keyboard instrument can be used to establish harmonic support. Minimal use of keyboard support during a warm-up period will encourage greater awareness of vocal sensations and foster better aural skills. Should a choral conductor not be able to model vocal exercises adequately, a trusted chorister or singing teacher could be enlisted for the assignment.

Cooldowns can be very brief (one to two minutes). Using descending glides (lip trills/ humming/a single vowel),

the conductor "returns" the choir to a speaking range. The final step in a cooldown is a lightly sung, sustained unison tone or chord in a medium range. This common closure can be a good time for centering, praising, evaluating, and giving announcements. The choral conductor has no musical instrument without the choir. The voices are lyric and fragile. They need the tender care of preparation (the warm-up) and a grateful, wise closing act of benediction (cooldown). As the custodian of voices, understand that preparation and gracious release encourage healthy voice use.

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Conclusion

(Allen Henderson, author)

It is important to acknowledge that voice teachers do not agree amongst themselves which is the “best” way to teach voice, and choral conductors do not agree amongst themselves whether they should even teach voice to their choir. Just acknowledging this simple fact can open the doors to communication and facilitate cooperative exchange of ideas. At some level, the basic fundamentals of vocal technique (breath, alignment, resonance) are the same in both solo and choral singing. Even among instructors holding the most extreme of differing opinions, there is some common ground about the basic functioning of the human system. That said, there are varying degrees of understanding about anatomy and function between voice teachers as a group, between choral conductors as a group, and between the two groups.

It is only through constructive dialogue and an unwavering commitment to build a common base of understanding that we as practitioners can build a unified team that works together to provide an optimal environment in which our singers can flourish and develop the ability to adapt to the varying demands placed on them throughout their singing careers. The leadership of both NATS and ACDA are committed to cooperative efforts to provide continuing education for current practitioners as well as advocate for the revision of academic training programs in order to ensure that all of our pedagogy is increasingly fact based. Only by working together can we effectively and unambiguously dispel the myths and mistructions associated with singing in various settings and in a manner that is universally validated, applied, and communicated from generation to generation. 

NOTES

- ¹ IPA Chart, <http://www.cafepress.com/cascadilla.14298591>
- ² The International Phonetic Alphabet, <http://westonruter.github.com/ipa-chart/keyboard/>
- ³ Jennifer Smith, “Downloading and Using Phonetics Fonts,” <http://www.unc.edu/~jlsmith/ipa-fonts.html>
- ⁴ National Association of Teachers of Singing, http://www.nats.org/cgi/page.cgi/about_journal_singing.html

- ⁵ Richard Miller, “Thinking Phonetically,” *The NATS Journal* (Nov/Dec 1989).
- ⁶ Berton Coffin and Pierre Delattre, *Sounds of Singing*, 2nd ed. (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1987), 45.
- ⁷ Brenda Smith and Robert Sataloff, *Choral Pedagogy*, 3rd ed. (San Diego, CA: Plural Publishing, Inc.: 2013), 211.
- ⁸ For additional information, see Richard Norris, “Seating Problems of Vocalists,” in *Choral Pedagogy*, 3rd ed, Brenda Smith and Robert Sataloff (San Diego, CA: Plural Publishing, Inc.: 2013), Chapter 8.

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