



# Coordinating Vocal Colors in Women's Choruses

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When singers in women's choruses combine their individual vocal colors, they create vibrant sonorities. As members of an equal voice ensemble, they must learn to coordinate these distinct colors to form an integrated whole, one that captures the expressive intent of a range of musical compositions. Choral conductors recognize the challenges of helping many voices coalesce. Men's and mixed choruses face similar challenges. Higher frequencies in treble voices may accentuate these differences, and achieving a unified sound becomes even more complicated if members of the group seek to develop as soloists through private study.

The contents of this article are intended primarily for the ensemble needs of high school and collegiate women's choruses, with potential application

to adult women's choruses. Single instrument ensembles (a flute choir, for example) represent homogenous groupings of players with comparable ranges and timbre. The complex physiology of individual voices in women's choruses means vocal colors vary even more than a group of instruments of comparable size and shape. Choral singers also bring an assortment of personalities, temperaments, levels of musicianship, learning styles, reasons for participation, and more. Each singer possesses a mix of confidence and insecurity, all based on past experience and personal perceptions. What singers have been told or tell themselves about their voice quality and singing potential influences how they envision their voices as legitimate musical instruments.

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Every voice has a place in a choral ensemble. The great seal of the United States (commonly pictured on American currency) incorporates the Latin phrase “e pluribus unum,” meaning “from many, one.” This motto captures the essence of a democracy: a union made up of numerous individuals forming a single body. I can't think of a more apt summation of the choral art. With this in mind, I will review attributes of singers who participate in women's choruses, note similarities and differences, propose ways conductors can help these choral singers create a unified sound, and summarize the responsibilities of the singer in what I call “coordinating vocal colors.” Many choral specialists would agree that a host of factors impact choral “blend” (in the conventional use of the term), including vocal tone color, voice size, pitch precision, and rhythmic accuracy.<sup>1</sup> Here I will focus on vocal tone color as a significant variable in achieving a unified ensemble sound.

Only singers have the power to alter and adjust sounds they contribute. They alone can do the work necessary to coordinate these vocal colors. Despite this, conductors can play an important role in this process. They can encourage singers to know their own voices, invite them to find ways to capitalize on their strengths, teach techniques for optimizing their sound through adjusting tonal parameters in healthy ways, and provide opportunities for singers to independently hear themselves in context and make ongoing adaptations.

The remainder of this article is divided into two large sections, the first addressing the role of the conductor in helping singers in women's choruses coordinate vocal colors. This section covers aspects of assigning parts, embracing varied vocal colors, categorizing voices, seating the chorus, and instructing singers in ways to adjust their vocal color. The second section outlines the singer's critical role, including elements of blend, self-awareness in group context, autonomy, and identity.

## The Conductor's Role

To prepare women in single-sex choruses to coordinate their vocal colors, conductors need to understand the attributes of these voices. More importantly, each conductor needs to know the characteris-

tics of the particular singers in the current ensemble.<sup>2</sup> Based on this foundational knowledge, a conductor decides how to distribute voice part assignments, position singers, and facilitate the learning process. Ultimately the conductor enables singers to manage these differences in a corporate setting, helping them stay true to their own individuality while weaving their unique vocal tone color in and among many others. Before determining how to help singers integrate their varied vocal colors, conductors need to understand the attributes of these singers.

### *Voice part assignments: Function versus identity*

For singers to coordinate their voices as an ensemble, they must first recognize that their singing voice has a function in a choral setting, but that function does not *define* them or their voice. Conductors often refer to individual singers in women's choruses as either an *alto* or a *soprano*. When the conductor says, “Jennifer is an alto,” the singer is given this label. Young adult female singers often show a strong sense of loyalty to this assigned identity.

A number of factors influence how a singer characterizes herself in terms of voice part. As early as elementary school, a music teacher might assign a young singer to a voice part. The basis for this assignment could lie in 1) perceived range or natural tessitura, 2) general pitch of speaking voice, 3) ability to read music and/or independently hold a harmony part, and 4) a conductor's need to balance and equally distribute voices across two or more voice part sections. When repertoire involves part-singing, only a percentage of singers can cover the first soprano part, where the melody typically lies. If asked what part she usually sings, a young female singer tends to answer in accordance with someone else's decision to place her on one voice part over another.

Beyond personal history, a young singer develops a level of comfort stemming from past experience (i.e. always singing the alto part). She may possess vocal limitations, such as a lack of familiarity with ways to access her head voice or engage her chest register. She may also have deficiencies in her musicianship, which result in difficulty hearing and holding a harmony part, possibly related to uncultivated aural skills.

When conductors recruit singers for a women's chorus, they usually assign voice parts based on information

gathered through an audition. According to Weston Noble, “Auditions are the bedrock of your choral program. Decisions made at this time are permanent.”<sup>3</sup> Anyone who has held such auditions understands what Noble suggests—that when conductors decide which singers to accept into the ensemble and what voice parts to assign them, these decisions often remain unchanged for the entire year.

“Each voice possesses a core color, or central character discernable by both conductors and singers. Each singer benefits by understanding and embracing her own natural timbre.”

Perhaps thinking of these auditions as opportunities to gather information (rather than as tattoo appointments) might help conductors feel less pressure. I call these meetings “voice placement hearings.” Individual singers generally sing alone for these hearings. Aside from assessing an individual singer’s timbre and abilities in that seven-minute window of time, a conductor must consider other aspects of ensemble singing, such as personnel needs and repertoire requirements. An equal voice ensemble, with a flexible number of spaces for enrollment, has even more levels of variability. A conductor faces many challenges when trying to listen to a single voice and make judgments that account for so many undetermined variables.

By nature, choral singing involves part-singing, or expanded harmonic textures made possible through the involvement of multiple singers. In a mixed choir, differences in the attributes of male and female voices create an apparent high and low part division. A women’s chorus possesses a more homogenous grouping. Since the members can produce a comparable range of pitches, conductors must devise criteria for assigning singers to cover parts equally. It also means singers may be tempted to define themselves in relation to others in the group.

As a seventh grader, I was assigned to play the third trumpet part in marching band. I repeated one note for most of the first eight measures of our show opener while the first trumpets arpeggiated their way through a dynamic melody. Although my third trumpet part

assignment may have suited my developing abilities, it didn’t define me. I was a trumpet player like all the other trumpet players. Likewise, members in women’s choruses sing assigned parts, but are all singers. Though this may seem like semantics, I believe that conductors and singers can avoid calling an individual singer “an alto.” She sings the alto part, but in reality, she is a singer, like all others in the ensemble. Regarding voice part assignments, Sandra Peter notes the importance of “language: how we speak to singers about their own instruments, about issues of range, tessitura, color, timbre, and our own opinions about all of the above.”<sup>4</sup> In the end, it matters how a singer perceives herself. If she sees herself as a “natural born alto,” she behaves with certain self-expectations and assumed limitations. For printed concert programs, instead of grouping names under voice part headings, I list singers alphabetically by last name. This communicates to the singers and audience the equal status of singers in the ensemble.

#### *Achieving a unified sound through “coordinated diversity”*

Individual female voices can exhibit significant differences in character and quality. Every fall when I hear the vocalists interested in joining the women’s chorus I conduct, I marvel at the diversity of colors in the female voice. Each singer produces a distinct timbre with a characteristic singularity of sound. Listeners can often recognize an individual singer by her voice (think of the instantly identifiable vocal timbre of Adele or Idina Menzel). Despite these distinctions, voices also share commonalities. In a broader sense, each voice possesses a core color, or central character discernable by both conductors and singers. Each singer benefits by understanding and embracing her own natural timbre. She can learn to enhance and vary this inherent color through effort and vocal instruction. Each singer should feel confident that her color has a place in the women’s chorus. Each roster of singers presents a unique set of colors distinct to that group of individuals. As I say to choruses I conduct, never before and never again will this particular group of vocal colors perform together.

When assembling personnel for a choir, conductors often choose one of three approaches to achieve a unified choral sound: selectivity, conformity, or coordinated

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diversity.

*Selectivity* means holding restrictive auditions, choosing only a particular kind of voice and screening others out. Russian choral composer and conductor Pavel Chesnokov wrote in 1940 that “[s]ingers with such sharply differentiated timbres should not be accepted into the choir: one or two such voices are enough to spoil the ensemble...,” advocating the need for a “similar timbre of voices” to achieve ensemble integrity.<sup>5</sup> Siding with this approach, Stephen Bolster claims that “[o]ccasionally, a voice is so much larger, more focused, or more resonant than other voices in an ensemble that the voice simply will not blend.”<sup>6</sup>

If such a selection process is not possible, some conductors choose *conformity*, the practice of coaching singers to adhere to a singular model or “ideal sound” the conductor has in mind. For this option, the conductor must persistently monitor the sound, repeatedly asking singers to make accommodations. Some singers may have a more challenging experience if their voices do not naturally match the conductor’s ideal. Less experienced singers may try to suppress attributes in unnatural or harmful ways. They may also become discouraged. This depends on the manner in which the conductor enforces compliance.

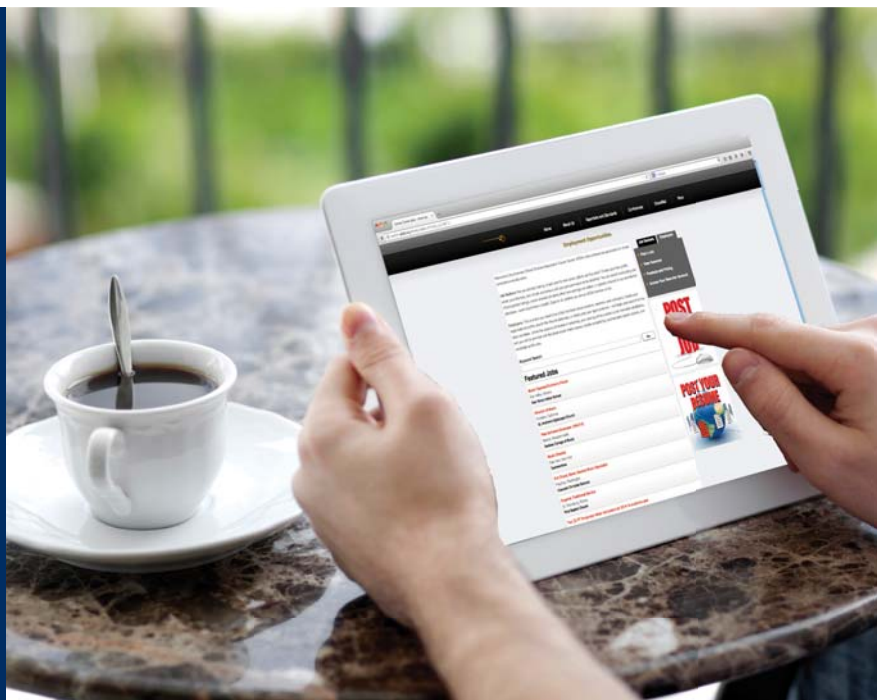
In contrast to the first two options of *selectivity* or *conformity*, a conductor can welcome the unique diversity of

colors of a group of individuals (different every season and year) by arranging and enabling singers to coordinate these distinct colors into a collectively complimentary sound, or what I call *coordinated diversity*. Think of singers as a variety of flowers chosen for a centerpiece, carefully arranged to achieve a balance of contrasting and complimentary colors to produce a unified composition. This option requires conductors and singers to thoughtfully manage a host of variables. Hilary Apfelstadt suggests that successful women’s choir conductors “honor the unique timbre of women’s voices” through repertoire choices, vocal instruction, and varying part assignments.<sup>7</sup>

The digital era makes a fourth option possible. Creating a composite “virtual choir” where an unlimited number of singers record individual audio tracks mixed later by a technician who never meets the singers. The singers have no way of hearing and responding to the sounds their colleagues generate. This works in theory if everyone stays in tune and keeps time with a virtual conductor or click track. I admit at times I have wished that I had a grand mixing board with an adjustable fader for every singer. But singers are autonomous, and part of the pleasure and challenge of directing a choir comes from inspiring individual singers to make adjustments on their own for the greater good of the group. When conductors

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frequencies that have greater or lesser intensity in any given voice).<sup>12</sup> These tonal variations mirror the effect of adjusting the equalizer controls on a stereo system to fade between “muddiness” and “tinniness.” Reducing voices to three categories may oversimplify the reality of differences, but many singers have a central tendency that corresponds to one of these three primary colors. For further clarification, I have created a chart showing descriptors for the attributes, potential problems, and classic and contemporary singer archetypes (drawn from opera, musical theater, and popular genres) for each category (Table 3).

## *Pastel*

A light voice (pastel) tends to have a pure, sweet, “hooty” character, easily “floating” or exhibiting weightlessness, especially in the upper register. I often think of this voice as youthful or resembling a “boy choir” sound. This voice category can become problematic if the sound is too breathy or under-produced. Such breathiness can be developmental, and even trained young female singers in the 16-22 year range will sometimes exhibit the glottal chink. Still, many singers have this type of light dimension to their singing tone. Traditional amateur choral singers, or generally untrained singers will often produce this kind of vocal tone.

## *Neon*

Listeners could describe a bright voice (neon) as clear, ringing, resonant, focused—a sound that carries easily. Identifying characteristics include brilliance, pitch clarity, and definition. A singer with a bright tone has the

potential for the sound to become nasal, and the same crystalline character that provides clarity and “ping” can become piercing. A smaller percentage of singers may possess this characteristic tone, but singers who perform musical theater, folk, or popular styles may have reinforced these tendencies to serve the purposes of this repertoire.

## *Rich*

The last category, dark (rich) tone, sounds full and robust, possessing depth and warmth. Deeply saturated jewel tones have the characteristics of these voices. Voice teachers often encourage a young female with this quality of tone to pursue operatic singing, but such voices work well in gospel and popular styles also. This vocal color can sometimes become throaty or swallowed, overly covered, and fall under pitch.

For these three categories, the descriptors account for general vocal attributes without privileging one type over another. All have virtues and all have potential limits. Singers may possess more than one of these attributes or a combination thereof. They may also appear to exhibit varied characteristics when they sing in upper or lower registers. Most singers can manipulate their voices to emulate or “manufacture” any one of these three colors. Impersonators such as Christina Bianco or artists who play roles that require a change in vocal timbre, such as Audra McDonald, clearly demonstrate that vocal color is not a static, immutable attribute.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, a singer will often reveal a natural tendency, especially before receiving instruction in ways to enhance or expand the palette of her vocal timbre.

**Table 3**

Color category	pastel	neon	rich
Description	light	bright	dark
Desirable attribute	pure	clear	warm
Potential vocal problem	breathy	nasal	swallowed
Archetypes: classical contemporary	Kathleen Battle Kelli O'Hara	Sarah Brightman Kristen Chenoweth	Leontyne Price Christina Aguilera

### Seating the Chorus

Sorting voices into categories allows conductors to take inventory and organize the colors represented by a specific roster of singers. Imagine a floral arrangement that includes a range of hues. Rather than changing these colors to make them more uniform, the florist carefully groups and arranges flowers, positioning each one to complement the whole. To make the most of an array of vocal colors, choral conductors can “arrange” singers in a similar fashion. Weston Noble promoted a procedure for matching voices and assigning standing positions to achieve choral blend. I have based much of what I describe below on his principles.<sup>14</sup> Debra Atkinson effectively summarizes Noble’s technique and other similar approaches.<sup>15</sup>

To arrange seating, I begin by identifying singers according to their tendency toward one of the three primary color categories. During a rehearsal early in the year, members of one section take turns singing a phrase of a familiar song, while the rest of the choir determines if they hear the voice color as 1) light, 2) bright, or 3) dark. After an individual sings, I count to three and ask the listeners to all show their “vote” (holding up 1, 2, or 3 fingers) at the moment I reach the count of 3. This gives each chorus member the opportunity to listen to a voice and attempt to characterize it independently. Although this takes some rehearsal time, doing so makes the process transparent. It also allows singers to see how their peers perceive voices differently.

Once I have determined the base color of each voice, I work with the singers to devise a number order in each voice part from lightest to darkest (with brightest in the center) in one continuum.<sup>16</sup> The process includes grouping singers first within categories 1, 2, or 3, and then pairing

singers down the line to see how their voices naturally resonate when positioned side by side. By hearing pairs of voices in combination, I can find an optimum location for each singer in a continuous line. Often simple trial and error reveals that two seemingly contrasting voices align beautifully as a neighboring pair.<sup>17</sup> By placing singers next to voices that integrate well with their own, each ensemble member has a more satisfying experience.

I then seat this continuous line, starting with the first seat in the front corner winding upwards through the rows set aside for those assigned to that voice part. Singers know their “place” number, i.e. if there are 15 singers assigned to the first soprano part, each singer in that section has a number from 1 to 15 (see Table 4). When a section of repertoire calls for divisi, those singers are divided in a way that works best for this group of individuals, 1-7 singing the upper note and 8-15 singing the lower; or depending on the character and size of the voices, a different distribution such as 1-10 on the upper note and 11-15 on the lower. A better balance occurs when the majority of category 1 voices sing the upper note. Note that all three colors occur in singers assigned to each voice part, as opposed to designating all “light” voices as singing the Soprano 1 part or all “bright” voices singing Soprano 2.

Positioning singers in such a manner may not dramatically affect the overall sound, and these placements become irrelevant if the singers stand in mixed-part formation for performance. The greater benefits come from how the singers think about themselves and their roles in the context of a women’s chorus. James Daugherty suggests that the benefits of such configurations, though unsubstantiated by research, encourage “sensitivity to ensemble sound, while giving singers permission to con-

**Table 4**

Seating Arrangements for an SSAA Women’s Chorus According to Voicing Continuum

Soprano I					Soprano II					Alto I					Alto II				
							18	17	16				17	16					
11	12	13	14	15	11	12	13	14	15	11	12	13	14	15	11	12	13	14	
10	9	8	7	6	10	9	8	7	6	10	9	8	7	6	10	9	8	7	6
1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5

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sider their own comfort in phonation and hearing within that context."<sup>18</sup>

## *Shading*

I have proposed that each singer has a characteristic color. But singers also need to develop ways to alter their natural timbre, or adjust the vocal tract to create a different "shade" of vocal color. By shifting the pharyngeal position (also termed *aggiustamento*), singers alter the dimensions of the resonance chamber. Similar to the way painters add white or black pigment to generate degrees of color, singers can make internal adjustments to vary their base color. Zabriskie identifies five resonance factors on a "placement meter" where singers use their index fingers to point forward along the sides of the jaw and rotate them back to show change of placement.<sup>19</sup> Using the Italian terms *chiaro* for light and *oscuro* for dark, he designates the following five points on this meter:

chiaro	bright
chiaro/chiaroscuro	brightish
chiaroscuro	bright/dark
chiaroscuro/oscuro	darkish
oscuro	dark <sup>20</sup>

Similarly, I have asked singers to use the image of "tonal shutters" (like panels that open and close on a pipe organ). Singers position both hands beside their faces with flat palms facing forward. By rotating their wrists forward, they symbolize a brighter or more forward placement, whereas pivoting their wrists backward connotes a darker placement. As they sustain a single pitch on an "ah" vowel, the wrist-pivoting gesture allows them to explore a continuum from the brightest tone quality they can create, gradually fading to the darkest. I remind singers to try to maintain a true "ah" vowel while moving through the range of shutter positions rather than achieve differences by making more pronounced changes to the vowel. This activity often surprises vocalists as they experience the full spectrum of tonal colors available to them. A brief discussion of how singers achieve these changes can enable novices to shape their sounds. This practice provides critical information for singers who seek to coordinate their voices with the voices of others. It also allows singers to respond to requirements of varied

repertoire, a skill especially valuable to those who wish to sing professionally.<sup>21</sup>

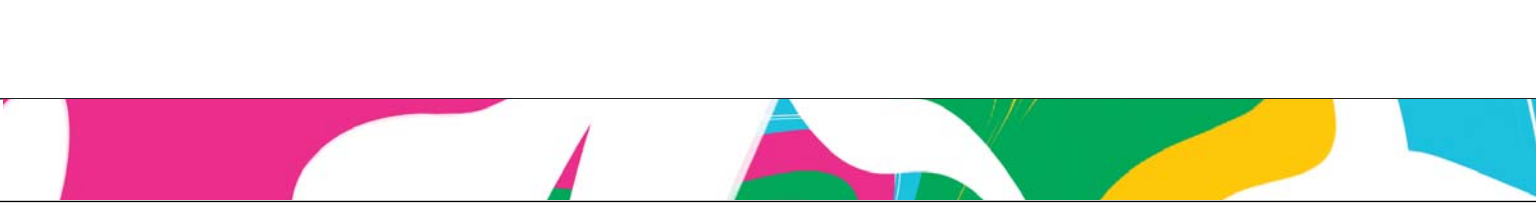
Vowel shapes (which undergo constant mutations in sung language) offer yet another means for singers to vary and match vocal color. Registration adds further complexity. Others have enumerated on these elements of vocal production and how to develop them. Choral conductors need to recognize the extent of variables that might impact the overall coordination of vocal colors in an ensemble.<sup>22</sup> A singer must be aware of 1) her own unique color tendency, 2) her options for varying the shades of this color and how to go about this in a healthy manner, 3) the impact of each vowel shape she produces, and 4) the impact of the register (or combination of registers)—when to lighten and when to intensify a sound during any given passage of music. Since these variables change constantly, singers must use their voices in exceedingly facile ways. Aside from bringing this to the attention of the singers, conductors need to help singers develop the skills to know when to make these changes in the midst of performing in an ensemble context. Each individual bears some responsibility for how well the group achieves color coordination across the ensemble. With this in mind, I now turn to the responsibilities of the singers.

## **The Singer's Role**

As stated earlier, the responsibility for actively coordinating vocal colors fall to the singers. In this section I will explore the challenges of the term "blend," show how singers can be aware of their own voice and the voices around them, address the need for singers to make conscious changes to the sounds they produce, and examine how singers as persons need to feel comfortable and connected.

## *Blend*

Conductors often comment on "blend" in choral singing when they desire a more uniform sound. Many choral specialists hold this as a central ideal.<sup>23</sup> Others question its usefulness and point out problematic aspects of the term. In her book *The Solo Singer in the Choral Setting*, Margaret Olson cites numerous authorities who represent a range of views regarding the concept of "blend." These include the belief that a director must subdue more colorful voices,



or at least ensure they are unidentifiable.<sup>24</sup> Some use the term “blend” as a verb, noting “the choral director’s job is to blend these various [vocal] qualities into a uniform sound.”<sup>25</sup> Others use “blend” as a noun: “*Blend* is the degree to which multiple voices are perceived as a unit/whole, rather than as individuals; this is achieved through a matching of pitch, volume, timbre, vowel, and timing.”<sup>26</sup> James Jordan questions the use of the word “blend” as a verb and describes it as a “natural outgrowth of healthy vocal technique.”<sup>27</sup>

When a conductor asks a chorus to “blend,” what does this directive mean to the individual singer? One singer cannot “blend” as an independent action. In truth, “blend” is the desired outcome the conductor, thinking also of the concert audience, wishes to hear. Asking a group of singers to “blend” does not communicate clearly what action singers need to take. Does one singer change her timbre to match another (undesigned) singer, or does she expect others to adjust to her?

Some might say asking singers to blend means the conductor wants them to listen, but listening alone will not change the sound. A singer must take action in response to what she hears. She must change something. Knowing what variables can be altered, how to alter them, and which ones to alter requires a set of skills each singer needs at her disposal. The art of achieving blend rests on the actions and abilities of the singers knowing when to lead and when to follow, when to assert and when to recede, when to brighten and when to darken vocal colors. A conductor can comment on blend and request it from a chorus, but the singers alone, as a collective, have the power to make the necessary and often subtle changes to achieve this. A choral conductor can give clearer instructions, requesting that individual singers: 1) be more mindful of their voices, 2) be aware of other voices and their own in context amidst them, and 3) adjust their voices based on the changing moment-to-moment context.

### *Self-awareness*

As an initial step toward achieving a unified choral sound, a conductor needs to discover what each singer knows about her own voice and help sensitize her to its various properties. If asked, could each singer describe the primary attributes of her own voice? Conductors can reveal what singers know by asking them to answer

descriptive questions about their voices on a questionnaire distributed at the first rehearsal. During the first couple of weeks of rehearsals, “voice” or locate positions for the members of the chorus (as described above). This can be a public process that gives each singer information about how listeners might characterize her voice. Singers need help developing self-awareness. When a singer knows and embraces her natural vocal attributes, she can make better sense of her role in group settings.

As singers learn more about their vocal attributes, conductors can ensure that each vocalist sees the desirable qualities in her voice.

In a recent pilot study, I recorded each member of a women’s chorus performing the refrain of a traditional spiritual. I played the series for the entire ensemble, with each voice identified only by code number. I invited the singers to classify each voice based on the three primary colors model. Afterward, I was surprised to hear some students admit they didn’t even recognize their own voice when they heard it among the series. Singers hear their own recorded voice through air conduction but perceive and adjust their real-time voices via both bone and air conduction. Conductors may assume singers know more about their own voices than they do. In reality, Margaret Olson asserts that “it is impossible to hear oneself as others hear.”<sup>28</sup> A singer needs help to identify the character of her voice.

Self-awareness requires honest self-appraisal that might make a singer feel uncomfortable and self-consciousness. A singer identifies with her voice. As singers learn more about their vocal attributes, conductors can ensure that each vocalist sees the desirable qualities in her voice. Using three equally valid categories of tone quality can help. Embracing all vocal colors affirms the natural beauty in everyone. This contrasts with imposed conformity to an ideal, similar to the subtle messages of a single ideal body type the media promotes. Some singers may fail to appreciate their own vocal attributes if they don’t like the quality of their voice. This kind of insecurity can inhibit the coordination of voices. Each singer needs to understand the specific nature of what she contributes and how the group benefits from it.

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## *Other-awareness*

As noted earlier, female singers share many likenesses in terms of basic vocal characteristics, and this affects each singer's experience. The challenge of shared similarities means a singer may feel either lost in the crowd ("I don't matter") or in competition ("I need to assert my presence"). When choral conductors gather to sight-read repertoire at a professional development conference, they often fail to coordinate vocal colors. Since they concentrate on the primary task of reading and singing the correct notes and rhythms, they may not concern themselves with vocal production. This results in singers who assert, or sometimes over-assert, their contribution. They tend to focus on their own sound rather than hearing themselves *in relation to* the total composite of voices singing together.

Most of us have a tendency to focus on ourselves. When I review proofs in a series of family reunion por-

traits, my eyes tend to go directly to myself in each picture. I favor the proofs in which I look my best, failing to notice other members of my family with their eyes closed or grimacing. For an ensemble to function well, singers need to move beyond this self-focused approach to develop what I call "other-awareness," or the ability to hear your voice *in relation to* the others in the ensemble. Of course, singers must confidently know pitches and rhythms to free the mental capacity to begin listening across the ensemble. Fostering independent musicianship in choral singers expedites this process.

## *Making Decisions and Adjustments*

For singers to perceive themselves in relation to the group, they need opportunities to make choices that have the potential to enhance group outcomes. Even though I hold voice placement hearings in advance, I always ask

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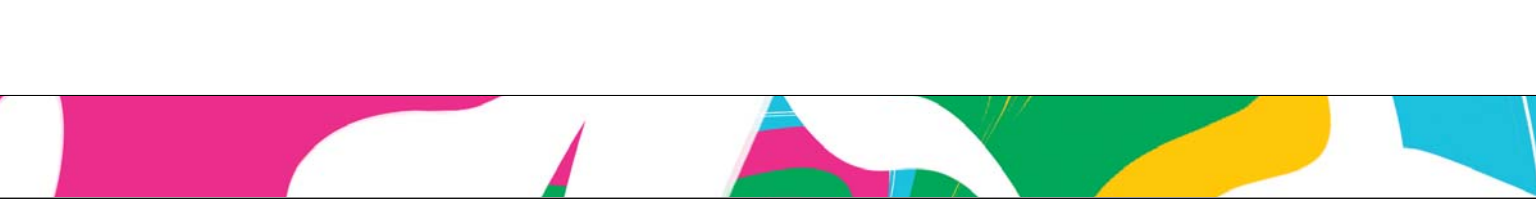
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students to complete an information sheet at the first rehearsal. This includes a section where they rank their own preference for a voice part assignment. This allows them to express their own comfort level regarding where they envision themselves contributing to this particular group. I remind them that having multiple voice parts enables the group to sing a range of repertoire and can provide an opportunity for individuals to explore or expand their capabilities. Although I consult notes from each singer's voice placement hearing to inform my choices, I often invite the large majority to sing the voice part they list as their first choice, only needing to assign a small number to their second choice.

Occasionally students resist the idea of ranking all four parts and only designate one voice part. Conductors may wonder what makes a singer believe she “only sings Soprano 1.” What in her history and experience has convinced her of this? Could she be flexible if she had more information about her voice and its capabilities? Early in my teaching career, I reassigned a high school singer with strong musicianship skills, moving her from singing Soprano 1 to singing Soprano 2. Her mother protested, suggesting I had demoted her daughter to “second string,” as coaches do on a basketball team. Conductors can educate singers about the rationale for assigning parts.

Singers learn to keep the ensemble's best interest in mind when conductors encourage openness and the willingness to try other parts. Recently at the start of a semester, I wanted members to think about how their part assignments impacted the ensemble sound. As we began to read through new music, I invited them to try any part for that first rehearsal. I modeled this after my own behavior as a teenager singing hymns in church. I would get bored reading one harmony part and skip up or down to another. I wanted the singers to listen across the group and become more aware of how their voices interacted with others. I also wanted them to experience firsthand the actual range of pitches that each part required (often more varied than they imagine). This allowed them to explore the potential options for how this particular group of singers could distribute themselves across parts. I even suggested that, at any given moment during a first read-through, they could shift to a part that seemed to need more singers. According to Lisa Fredenburgh, this kind of

exercise “increases the singer's empathy for other parts.”<sup>29</sup>

In practice, singers can treat voice part assignments as fluid and flexible. If singers learn to listen closely, they may sense a need to shift between parts. I learned this from watching an all-female collegiate a cappella group rehearsing. A student singing high soprano who could easily sight-read her own part didn't become exasperated when a new member struggled to learn the low alto part. Instead she moved next to the challenged singer to assist. Conductors can foster this “us” mentality to help balance disparities in a women's chorus.

Many conductors assume they must assign an even number of singers to each voice part. But often the collection of singers who happen to make up a women's ensemble in any given year do not naturally fall into even-numbered voice part groups. Even if they did, even numbers may not reflect an ideal distribution since voice size and weight can vary significantly from singer to singer. A conductor can alleviate this by varying the numbers of persons on any given part, inviting volunteers to take on a musicianship challenge and shift to another part for a particular piece or passage where needed. This allows the individuals in the group to assume responsibility for making these adjustments. The conductor will need to assist the group to achieve a desired balance (which may vary according to each conductor's preference), but encouraging singers to listen for apparent inconsistencies will heighten their ability to actively make adjustments.

### *The Unique Persons Behind the Voices*

This article has focused primarily on issues surrounding variations of vocal tone color in women's choruses. But conductors must not overlook the multi-dimensional women who produce these colorful sounds. Each member brings her own personal history, beliefs, and complexity. Each singer has a particular combination of musicianship, temperament, learning styles, and life experience. In order for a group of individuals to coordinate their efforts, they need to feel comfortable and trust that their colleagues will show sensitivity to these differences. Singers need to feel connected, knowing each other by name and having opportunities to build relationships.<sup>30</sup> This takes time. When an ensemble has limited rehearsal hours, singers need help building these kinds of connections.

# Coordinating Vocal Colors in Women's Choruses

Every fall I ask singers to prepare a short written biography and attach a current photograph of themselves. I post these biographies on an online blog for all to access. I also project self-playing presentation slides to show announcements during the twenty minutes before rehearsal starts. Among these slides, I include pictures and a few short quotes from the singers' biographies to help singers learn their classmate's names and gain enough information to start a conversation with a peer.

Singers need ways to communicate with each other and with the conductor. In a typical choral rehearsal, conductors expect singers to readily comply without giving them opportunity to contribute or make any substantive decisions.<sup>31</sup> This limits important communication from singer to conductor. Educational philosopher John Dewey notes the importance of freedom in a learning context, where students can be heard and known, asserting that "enforced quiet and acquiescence prevent pupils from disclosing their real natures," creating a "highly artificial situation" that impacts how well teachers understand the learners.<sup>32</sup> To learn and contribute, singers must engage in the process. Conductors can ask questions, converse with singers individually, and invite singers to write journals or other short response papers, all as a means to get to know these individuals and better understand their needs.

## Conclusion

An individual singer has more to offer a women's chorus than just her "instrument." Her experiences as a contributing member of the group matter just as much as the quality of sound a conductor desires. Each singer adds a unique vibrancy to the sound a women's chorus produces, making a distinct contribution artfully woven into the spectrum of sound they collectively create. Singers need not neutralize or "water down" the vivid colors of their voices, but each singer can play a key role in aligning these colors in complimentary ways to yield a well-integrated mosaic of sound. They can maintain vitality and distinction of sound while simultaneously allowing the colors to "blend" in the audience's ears.

In the musical play *Sunday in the Park with George*, the character playing impressionist painter George Seurat

speaks to Jules, another artist trying to make sense of the unusual technique of pointillism Seurat uses:

GEORGE: What is the dominant color? The flower on the hat?...What is that color?

JULES (*bored*): Violet.

(GEORGE *takes him by the hand and moves him closer to the canvas*)

GEORGE: See? Red and blue. Your eye made the violet.

JULES: So?

GEORGE: So, your eye is perceiving both red and blue *and* violet. Only eleven colors—no black—divided, not mixed on the palate, mixed by the eye. Can't you see the shimmering?<sup>22</sup>

Conductors can help members celebrate the integrity and individuality of each vocal color found in a women's chorus. Together that unique combination of individuals can create a collective sonority, cohesive and shimmering, a glorious amalgam of colors. ■

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Choral conductors do not agree on a single definition of the term "blend." Many see it as a controversial concept.
- <sup>2</sup> James Jordan suggests conductors should know each singer's voice. James M. Jordan, "False Blend: A Vocal Pedagogy Problem for the Choral Conductor," *Choral Journal* 24, no. 10 (1984): 26.
- <sup>3</sup> Weston H. Noble, *Creating the Special World: A Collection of Lectures*, ed. Steven M. Demorest (Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, Inc., 2005), 43.
- <sup>4</sup> Sandra Peter, "Women's Choirs: Mixing it Up: Voicing and Seating a Women's Choir," *Choral Journal* 50, no. 11

- (2010): 35.
- <sup>5</sup> Pavel Chesnokov, *The Choir and How to Direct It*, Translated from the Russian by John C. Rommereim (San Diego, California: Musica Russica, 2010), 21.
- <sup>6</sup> Stephen C. Bolster, "The Fixed Formant Theory and Its Implications For Choral Blend and Choral Diction," *Choral Journal* 23, no. 6 (1983): 31.
- <sup>7</sup> Hilary Apfelstadt, "Practices of Successful Women's Choir Conductors," *Choral Journal* 39, no. 5 (1998): 37-38.
- <sup>8</sup> Kenneth H. Phillips, *Directing the Choral Music Program*, 2nd edition (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 256.
- <sup>9</sup> Scott McCoy, *Your Voice: An Inside View*, 2nd edition (Delaware, OH: Inside View Press, 2012), 2.
- <sup>10</sup> Alan Zabriskie, *Foundations of Choral Tone: A Proactive and Healthy Approach to Vocal Technique and Choral Tone* (USingersPublishers, 2009), 67.
- <sup>11</sup> I did not originate the idea of applying color categories to voices. Well-known choral authorities such as Lynn Gackle and Wendy Treacher have expressed variations of this idea.
- <sup>12</sup> I base this on a presentation I heard Joe Miller give regarding singer's formants and how an awareness of these variations can help a conductor organize singers according to certain prevalent attributes.
- <sup>13</sup> Christina Bianco is an impressionist who specializes in imitating well-known female singers. Audra McDonald sang the operatic role of Bess in the 2012 Broadway revival of George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. In the 2014 production of the play *Lady Day at Emerson's Bar*, Audra McDonald played the late Billie Holiday and imitated the legendary blues singer's vocal quality and style.
- <sup>14</sup> Weston H. Noble, *Creating the Special World: A Collection of Lectures*, ed. Steven M. Demorest (Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, Inc., 2005), 4; *Achieving Choral Blend Through Standing Position with Weston Noble*, DVD-628 GIA Publications, Inc., 2005).
- <sup>15</sup> Debra S. Atkinson, "The Effects Of Choral Formation On The Singing Voice," *Choral Journal* 50, no. 8 (2010): 27-28.
- <sup>16</sup> I base this process on a model presented by Joe Miller, who seats individual voices in each section of a mixed choir as a continuum from lightest to darkest (using information about vocal formants to order singers).
- <sup>17</sup> Noble, *Creating the Special World*, 46.
- <sup>18</sup> James F. Daugherty, "On The Voice: Rethinking How Voices Work In a Choral Ensemble," *Choral Journal* 42, no. 5 (2001): 72.
- <sup>19</sup> Zabriskie, *Foundations of Choral Tone*, 41-42.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.
- <sup>21</sup> Scott McCoy, "The Choir Issue, Part 1," *Journal of Singing* 76, no. 3 (2011): 299.
- <sup>22</sup> Jordan, "False Blend," 25-26.
- <sup>23</sup> Timothy W. Sharp, *Precision Conducting: Achieving Choral Blend and Balance* (Dayton, OH: Roger Dean Publishing Company, 2005), 25-30.
- <sup>24</sup> Margaret Olson, *The Solo Singer in the Choral Setting: A Handbook for Achieving Vocal Health* (Blue Ridge Summit, PA: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 99-104.
- <sup>25</sup> Phillips, *Directing the Choral Music Program*, 203.
- <sup>26</sup> Sten Ternström, Harald Jers, and John Nix, "Group and ensemble vocal music," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Education: Volume 1*, eds. Gary E. McPherson and Graham F. Welch (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), 581.
- <sup>27</sup> Jordan, "False Blend," 26.
- <sup>28</sup> Margaret Olson, "Acoustic Issues and the Choral Singer," *Choral Journal* 45, no. 1 (2004): 46.
- <sup>29</sup> Lisa Fredenburgh, "Women's Choirs: Part Switching for Women's Choirs," *Choral Journal* 43, no. 7 (2003): 64.
- <sup>30</sup> Mary Hopper, "Building Community in the Women's Choir," in *Conducting Women's Choirs: Strategies for Success*, ed. Debra Spurgeon (Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, Inc., 2012), 117-131.
- <sup>31</sup> For a more radical critique of this tradition, see Juliet Hess, "Docile Choristers and the 'Choir Machine': A Search for Agency in Choir," *Proteus* 28, no. 1 (2012): 37-48.
- <sup>32</sup> John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster), 62.
- <sup>33</sup> James Lapine and Stephen Sondheim, *Sunday in the Park with George* (New York, NY: Applause Theatre Book Publishers, 1984), 71.