

SSAATTBB

Self-Conscious Sopranos, Apprehensive Altos, Timid Tenors, and Bashful Basses: Eliciting a Confident Vocal Sound in Young Singers

A teacher sits in his office before his first period choir and hears all of his students socializing out in the hall and trickling into the classroom. The noise is practically a roar even through his office door and is only brought down by his presence and the ringing of the bell. When he begins the day's vocal technique exercises however, the sound from the students is anything but energetic, full, or even present. This has gone on for weeks and despite his great model and custom picked exercises the choir still produces a timid, unsupported sound. The teacher is perplexed and becoming frustrated. What do these students need?

I want to understand how to enable students to willingly produce a confident and full vocal sound within a reasonable amount of time. The reason I find this to be a significant question is because a teacher needs to evoke a sound from their choir that they can successfully work with, because teaching in a way that addresses this issue will develop the students' musical skills and confidence, and because the students are in your ensemble due to the fact that they most likely want to learn to produce a full, pleasing vocal sound.

In my research and observation this semester, I sought to find some ideas and answers to the following questions, as they relate to my purpose and topic:

- What do students need physically?
 - What respiration exercises need to be used?
 - What phonation exercises need to be used?
 - How should they be sequenced?

- What do students need cognitively?
 - What do they need to know anatomically about the singing process and the singing voice?
 - What terminology should be used and how can it be incorporated into the lesson?

- What do students need aesthetically?
 - How do different models affect the student's understanding?
 - How can a conductor's gestures affect vocal production?

My sources include field teaching and placement observations in an 8th grade music exploration class at Frankton Jr./Sr. High School and a first year high school chorus at Cowan Jr./Sr. High School as well as many past experiences. Also, I have spoken on these topics with my teacher and mentor Dr. Alan Alder to gain insight from a seasoned educator who has taught voices of all types, ability levels, and ages. I received some insight from the book "The Science & Psychology of Music Performance: Creative Strategies for Teaching and Learning" by Richard Parncutt & Gary McPherson, as well as "Teaching Kids to Sing" by Kenneth Phillips.

The psychomotor skills required for singing are the most relevant factors in producing a healthy vocal sound. Vocal technique exercises fall into five categories that are meant to build upon one another and combine. They are respiration, phonation, resonant tone production, diction, and expression. Respiration and phonation are the two areas that I see as most related to the question and topic at hand. Respiration is first and foremost on this list for several reasons. Breath and air are the catalyst for the sound. Breathing for singing has to be done differently than how we breathe automatically in our day to day life. Exercises that promote abdo- costal breathing rather than our typical shallow rib-level breathing are essential.

I have found through field observations that plenty of teachers have exercises based on inhalation and are constantly giving cues to do so, but exercises on exhalation and breath management are not happening as consistently. I feel this is definitely contributing to the timid vocal sound I am hearing from young choirs virtually everywhere. Exhalation needs to be controlled and the breath managed according to the phrase length. This is not an innate action for people to do and thus needs to be addressed every day if possible with young singers.

Phonation issues at this age may come from bad habits in a student's speaking voice. Young students are not often asked to speak loudly and clearly to a whole room for any extended amount of time and therefore do not understand how to healthfully do so when singing. Early speaking, reading, or dramatic exercises can be very beneficial in demonstrating to students how to phonate with a healthy, supported tone. Exercises that highlight transitioning between high, middle, and low registers are not often utilized. Almost all of the vocal exercises I observe are based around stepwise motion (or triads being the biggest interval used) and typically span the range of a major fifth. Exercises with a wider range of musical vocabulary will help the students to feel comfortable expanding their range and improve their aural skills.

The sequencing of these exercises is the next component of successful technique training. The book "Teaching Kids to Sing" by Kenneth Phillips outlines a comprehensive sequencing of vocal exercises in all five areas of vocal technique with differentiated outlines for different grade levels. In the sections relating to respiration and phonation there are three subdivisions of exercises for each with six levels exercises within each subdivision. A teacher should start with the first level exercises of each subdivision and use them in tandem for an extended amount of time before moving onto the subsequent levels. The respiration training sequence includes the areas of

posture development, breathing motion, and breath management. The phonation training sequence includes the areas of lower adjustment (register), upper adjustment, and adjustment coordination.

Also, a well developed music literacy sequence will greatly improve the students' aural skills and contribute to an improved, confident, full vocal sound. In fact, it is an essential ingredient - "finely tuned" aural skills - in the physical component of what students need to sing well. The Sound Connections approach, created by Dr. Don Ester, links sound to syllable to symbol in order to lead the students to musical independence in tonal, rhythmic, and melodic reading. This is what students need, every day.

Next, I think it is important to ask what students need cognitively to address the issue of timid singing. What do they need to know? Every choir teacher has a whole bag of tricks and metaphors to fall back on to fix just about any vocal issue they are hearing from their group. But, very few of these teachers bother to explain to the students what their body is doing and compare it to what it needs to be doing when producing a healthy vocal sound. Knowledge truly is power, and if students do not understand the tools to their craft, they cannot truly master it.

Discussing, studying, and using anatomical terminology in the classroom makes students more responsible for their vocal production and keeps their focus on concrete parts of their vocal anatomy that they can adjust while singing. Abdominals, diaphragm, ribs/intercostals, muscle antagonism, vocal folds, larynx, soft/hard palate are all terms that vocal students should know by high school and be expected to discuss how they interact in the singing process. Taking the time to have students evaluate what they doing, what they feeling, what they are hearing is something that students need in order to fully understand their voice. Prompting these discussions and

reflections increase students' cognitive understanding of the singing process and makes connections between what they are doing physically and what they have learned cognitively.

Lastly, I wanted to understand what students need aesthetically to assist in their understanding of how to produce a confident, full sound. In observing young vocal students (middle through high school), I have only ever seen female teachers work with these students, and the young men, especially, struggle greatly to match pitch, displace the female model's octave to their own, and use/navigate their registers in an appropriate way. I feel it is the teacher's responsibility to provide a variety of vocal models (outside of their own) both live and recorded so the students can experience, evaluate, and discuss what they hear and relate it to the vocal technique skills and content they are learning. All singers benefit greatly when they have a highly skilled vocal model to learn from and even imitate at times to achieve their desired sound.

I also wanted to know what gestures and conducting expressions can assist in evoking a free and confident voice. Showing when to breathe and doing so in an exaggerated manner is a helpful reminder to students to keep the all too important breath, their singing "fuel", at the center of their focus. Using low and round conducting gestures for strong, full musical moments also helps to elicit supported, healthy singing that is led by abdominal breathing no matter what part of the range the student is singing in. Tension in the gesture will very likely create tension in the singers in your ensemble. Fluid gestures in general bring out a relaxed body posture for the singers that keeps them tensing up, breathing shallowly, and raising their larynx. There is also much that can be done with small hand and finger gestures (based on hand shape and direction of the open palm) to influence the height of the soft palate and placement of the sound within the mouth.

I feel that I have gained a great deal of insight into what I have observed to be a huge epidemic in the choral community. If young choral/vocal students are not started off well, they will have a very rough road ahead of them for their vocal development, if they even decide to continue with it after experiencing so much perceived failure. The scope and sequence of vocal technique development needs to be a written out, fully realized progression that is then able to be easily adjusted and adapted to fit their ensemble's needs. If a teacher is truly differentiating instructing and teaching comprehensively, than this issue will be addressed in all three learning domains that I focused on for this topic.

What do young vocal students need? They need respiration exercises that focus on not only inhalation but also exhalation and breath management, all using abdicostal breathing techniques. Students need phonation exercises that develop their healthy speaking voice and vocal register coordination. They need daily music literacy training that is done through a sound before sight approach. They need knowledge and engaged discussion of the physical singing process and the related anatomical parts and terminology. Students need a variety of vocal models and a conductor that uses their gesture to evoke a free and full sound from the choir. I hear all of these things from plenty of choral music educators both seasoned and fresh out of school. What separates the good from the great is talking the talk versus walking the walk. It's time to get walking.