

element(s) from any of the preceding steps: ostinato sections, partnered melodies, descant sections, canonic entrances or actual canon sections, echo sections, call and response, etc. Though only one or two sections may exhibit these features, students experience success more quickly when attempting transitional music. Hopefully by Step 8, sight-reading instruction has empowered the choir to read and use solfege on the more challenging sections of a transition piece.

Step 9—Sing two- or four-part songs.

By this stage, a teacher/conductor should be confident choosing any preferred music needed for performance or curricular needs based on the voices in the room rather than the students' singing independence.

Critical Thinking

Decision-Making

Training novice singers with little or no musical background can be very tedious or highly rewarding, or somewhere in between. Teacher choices, whether conscious or unconscious, generally determine student outcomes, so it seems important to determine the role of successive approximations toward independent music making versus teacher rote-instruction for every aspect of performance preparation.

It is quite possible that conductors who prefer not to work with middle school and beginning high school groups are actually referencing the *process* of teaching rather than the vocal ability of these young singers. Banging out notes on the piano and drilling individual parts are not particularly rewarding tasks, though many would not object if the reward (the success of students) was adequate. However, this tedious process is often rewarded by having the choir musically crash or simply stop when trying to combine the previously taught parts, which means more hammering of parts is now on the agenda! There is no doubt this process is a recipe for extreme teacher frustration when teaching middle school and beginning high school singers.

The preceding topics (pitch matching accuracy, tone building, developing independent harmony singing) have addressed very basic steps towards successful student performance, and hopefully the inclusion of teaching music skills and vocabulary along with the performance training. At this point, students should be able to sing correct pitches and rhythms of various music literature using healthy, free vocal production. When compared to the starting point of these students,

this is actually a huge accomplishment for a teacher to step in front of a first-time choir. The challenge, then, is to create an environment that empowers students to use their skills to make musical decisions (and to make those decisions on their own, as middle school students!). A prerequisite for this is a knowledge base—a core of information that supports higher order thinking.

State music curriculum guidelines should be considered appropriate for middle school and high school. This reflects the National Standards for Music Education and the National Music Educators National Conference (MENC) *Teaching Music through Performance in Schools* (1992) for connecting the National Standards to students performing in a similar task. Learning isolated notes does not even begin this process of learning what have learned. They do need to isolate what they have learned. The role of middle school singers is to transfer what they have learned a role in performance decisions. (The role of the conductor, however, is to set goals, when met, produce a mid-level of enjoyment—enjoy rehearsing—a choir that blooms with every musical decision produced. “bloom” or “detach these notes, how can we accomplish this?”)

Teaching for transfer requires that information can be sequentially processed perhaps the musical score. What is imperative that students clearly understand. Transfer will then likely occur with every aspect of the new piece, through previous work, and then the choir

this is actually a huge accomplishment. When compared to the teacher/conductor desire to step in front of a fine choir of functioning musicians, however, this may still be a choir with rehearsals that seem tedious and unfulfilling. The next challenge, then, is to create independent musicians who can use critical thinking skills to make musical decisions (and social, of course—these are still middle school students!). A prerequisite for critical thinking and creativity in students is a knowledge base—a core of information and understanding that can be used for higher order thinking.

State music curriculum guides define the information and skill sets considered appropriate for middle school singers. For the most part, each state version reflects the National Standards for Music Education provided by the Music Educators National Conference (MENC). A related article published by Abrahams in *Teaching Music through Performance in Choir, Volume 1*, provides an excellent model for connecting the National Standards knowledge base and performance expectations to students performing in high school choirs. Middle school choirs face a similar task. Learning isolated musical concepts and skills in a school music class does not even begin this process of organizing and using the knowledge students have learned. They do need to isolate skills and master them, but the final goal for middle school singers is to transfer musical learning across the repertoire and to play a role in performance decisions. (This does not refer to group performance decisions that belong to the conductor, but personal music making decisions.) These two goals, when met, produce a middle school choir that any teacher/conductor would enjoy rehearsing—a choir that does not require days of rote teaching and drill, with every musical decision prescribed by the teacher (“crescendo on the word bloom” or “detach these notes, just make them shorter but not staccato,” etc.). So how can we accomplish this?

Teaching for transfer requires task analysis by the teacher so prerequisite information can be sequentially delivered and connected to musical behaviors or perhaps the musical score. When learning musical details in one setting, it is imperative that students clearly understand what is being learned or done, and why. Transfer will then likely occur when a new song is introduced. Rather than teach every aspect of the new piece, the teacher helps students find similarities to the previous work, and then the choir applies the same technique or skill or knowledge.

Having students make performance decisions also relates to the transfer process because they must decide as they read or rehearse the piece whether the skills used in previous pieces are appropriate for the current work. Of course, on such things as performance practice guidelines, developing independence is gradual and probably slow (college music majors work to develop this same independence—this is a continuum), but on such things as singing expressively through the use of crescendo and decrescendo, students can begin to make good decisions. These decisions in more advanced choirs are not even acknowledged because we classify this as “being a well-trained musician.” If we want our students to reach that status, we must teach for that goal.

Using Musical Rules

Transferring knowledge from one setting to the next is made easier for students when some general principles are established (i.e., rules to guide decisions about the transfers). In beginning middle school music classes, which include students with no musical background, the rules should be very simple and reflective of what is being taught. Interestingly, when beginning students have established accurate performance (correct pitch and rhythm), they often feel their work is done; on a scale from 1 to 10, they perceive themselves as a 10. What they need to conceptualize is that learning pitches and rhythms is a 10 on the goal of pitch matching and singing accuracy, but it is a 0 on the goal of expressive singing. To move forward on this goal, they need to utilize some rules. Since these rules can relate to anything valued by the teacher, there is no right or wrong set of rules, but rather a choice to structure some generalizations in those areas important to the teacher. Further, the rules may need to change with the music (various performance practice rules, certainly), which is fine because it underscores the idea that decision-making (determining if something is an appropriate rule in a new setting) is an important part of critical thinking. As students progress, the need for teacher direction in their personal music making should diminish, which frees the conductor to rehearse, to accomplish performance goals that reflect his or her vision of the piece...in other words, to be a conductor.

Some examples of rules appropriate for beginning middle school singers who have little musical background are detailed below. These serve to clarify the process and should be adapted to meet personal preferences.

- **Rule of the steady beat**

When singing any note value longer than the steady beat value, singers should crescendo. Establishing a general principle saves rehearsal time and limits frustration by preventing errors with a rule that is applicable for much of the piece. The teacher/conductor must address only those instances when a crescendo is not desired or when the rule was implemented incorrectly.

- **Rule of consonant releases**

Though this rule can be implemented throughout the rehearsal or applied differently to each song, it serves as a guideline for most of the final consonant releases. The rule might structure using the last full beat, or the last half of the beat, or whatever is appropriate for the song and counting ability of the ensemble. Students assume some responsibility for releases by using the rule, which permits the conductor to address only those unique releases not suitable for rule application.

- **Rule of diphthongs**

Beginning singers who do not yet self-monitor their vowel sounds can quickly apply this rule. Identifying diphthongs and prescribing a method for performance (e.g., sing the first sound throughout most of the value and then quickly add the second sound) serves to educate and prevent most errors. When the teacher/conductor stops to address incorrect singing, this rule serves to foster student analysis of the problem (listen, identify, analyze, evaluate).

- **Rule of punctuation**

This rule contributes greatly to phrase awareness of beginning singers. The rule requires a lift or break for every punctuation mark throughout the piece. The reverse is also true: do not break if no punctuation exists. (This rule is extremely effective for correcting phrasing with beginners.) While

there is certainly punctuation in text that is ignored for musical reasons, having this rule makes singers aware that a decision must be made and allows the teacher/conductor to teach only the exceptions to the rule.

- **Rule of the slur (and other articulations)**

While most students can explain a slur, a surprising number of singers cannot sing one correctly. This rule requires a tenuto over the first note under the slur, followed by all other notes in the pattern sung without a tenuto marking.

There is no magic in any of these sample rules. Rules should reflect those behaviors valued by the teacher and should engage students more in the rehearsal process. Rules provide an opportunity for students to use higher-order thinking skills because when an expectation is established (the rule), the students must determine whether it was met, and if not, why. From the beginning, students develop judgment about applying rules: If something doesn't sound good, what could the choir do (what rule could we apply?) to improve the sound? Rules can be an excellent means to the end of independent musicianship for singers who lack formal training.

Middle school singers join choirs for a variety of reasons, and they come to sing with great variation in talent, training, motivation, and persistence. Providing an appropriate sequence for their learning is quite challenging for directors because musically, vocally, and socially the students differ greatly. Thus, restructuring a rehearsal environment to accommodate the many needs of middle school students creates a more rewarding teaching experience for the teacher and produces students who can match pitch, produce healthy tone, and maintain independence singing part songs as they increase their musicianship and learn to think like musicians.