

Chapter 5

Building Vocal Skill: A Pedagogical Hierarchy for Choirs

Choral conductors, even more so than teachers of singing, are divided in their opinions concerning vocal technique. Some refuse to employ any means to build voices. Either they consider such procedures unimportant, or they are afraid to use an exercise that is related to the singing process. Sometimes choral directors cloak their ignorance of the singing mechanism by dealing with the interpretative elements in a score and thus avoid any approach to the vocal problems of an individual in a chorus. There are also those conductors who insist upon using only the techniques learned from a favorite teacher. These are applied regardless of the nature of the problem or its desired solution. Finally, there are some who, without an orderly plan or procedure, utilize a great number of vocalizes, devices, and methods taken from many sources with the desperate hope that the tone of their chorus somehow will show a marked improvement. (p. 8)

Howard Swan
Choral Conducting Symposium

Students should be alerted that there are no mysteries regarding the technical aspects of singing. The teacher who regards the technical work of singing as shrouded in mystery inadvertently admits to a lack of information on the physical and acoustic nature of the vocal instrument. Singing appears to be a kind of magical process to this person, and the

technique of singing is an idiosyncratic structure built on intuition and trial and error. This explains the technique-mystique teacher's resistance to detailed information regarding the functional aspects of singing. How can one serve as priestess or priest if the mystery is taken away? (p. 211)

Richard Miller
The Structure of Singing

The previous section detailed overall pedagogical principles. These principles are to be applied to all categories in this section. It cannot be emphasized enough that an overall aural vigilance is necessary on the part of the conductor for there to be a state of vocal health with the choral ensemble.

Method is central to all efficient and enduring teaching. Method also contains a combination of bias and experience on the part of the person who writes the method. The "list" or method below may not, and probably is not, the method by which the studio teacher would teach voice. Many times, that method is strongly dictated by the individual being taught but is overseen by broad pedagogical brushstrokes that are at the philosophical underpinnings of the teacher providing the instruction. Good teaching is pedagogically biased teaching, whether in the studio or in the choral ensemble. The routes may be different because of the teaching situation; however, there must be a pedagogical direction and a hierarchical decision concerning how vocal skill should be taught. Choirs need vocal "tools" (i.e., vocal technique that is built in a logical and consistent process). A potpourri approach to choral training does achieve results, but it is neither healthy nor efficient over the long term. A "road map" is necessary.

The "map" or method presented here is based upon firsthand experiences and trial and error over the years, as well as input from numerous voice teachers who are both teachers and conductors. It provides an overriding structure for the logical teaching and building of healthy vocal technique within a choir.

Choral Ensemble Pedagogical Hierarchy

Relaxation

Alignment and Body Awareness

Relaxation of the Vocal Tract: Relaxing the Jaw, Tongue,
and Lips

Creating Spaciousness (Use of the Sigh)

Breathing

Exhalation and Inhalation

Support

Resonance

General Resonance

Specific Resonance

Vowel Development Hierarchy

Register Consistency

Dynamics

Crescendo/Decrescendo (Messa di Voce)

Range Extension Upward

Range Extension Downward

Leaps

Legato

Staccato

Martellato

Diction Teaching Principles

Pedagogical Ordering

The pedagogical breakdown is shown on the previous page. **The order within the first section is non-negotiable.** The skills in that section are hierarchical and must be taught in that order in every warm-up. Regardless of the length of the warm-up, these skills must always be reviewed and awakened each time.

The pedagogical order in the **second section** is suggested, as there may be subjective opinion and debate concerning the order within that box. Regardless of the order, those skills and techniques must be taught to the choir. The order is dependent upon the skills the choir brings to the ensemble. For vocally inexperienced choirs, this is the necessary pedagogical order. For more experienced choirs, the order may vary.

The **third section** stands alone because those principles should be taught independently. Diction principles can be prepared in the warm-up, but the application of diction occurs when texts are fused to musical materials. Further, this box deals with the techniques for teaching diction to a choir via the choral rehearsal.

What follows are teaching techniques or “recipes” for each of the categories. While there are many techniques for the teaching of all these elements, those that I have found most efficient in a choral ensemble are presented in this text. The essential teaching steps of those techniques are set apart from the text in boxes. The material in those boxes is reprinted on the index cards that accompany this volume. These cards can be carried into the rehearsal to remind conductors of the basic principles involved with a specific technique.

After mastering these techniques and understanding the objectives for each level, feel free to supplement teaching techniques you believe to be useable to broaden the pedagogical base you employ.



Chapter 6

Philosophy of Teaching Techniques

It is clear to anyone who has worked with choruses of both “amateur” and “professional” voices that well-taught voices can make better choral sound than untaught or badly taught voices. The teaching of voice has to be one of the most difficult and complicated of musical endeavors. You can’t see the voice, can’t touch it, you frequently have to depend on someone else even to hear it. One can only be grateful to those who undertake this remote and complex task, and who teach it as a means of musical expression rather than self-exhibition. (p. 6)

Robert Shaw
“Letters to a Symphony Chorus”
The Choral Journal (April 1986)

Each singer has a different physiognomy and, therefore, a slightly different sense of focus. This precludes a teacher being able to direct a tone to a specific place such as “behind the front teeth,” “in the nose,” and “in the sinuses.” As a student achieves a certain amount of vocal freedom and coordination of the various parts of the vocal mechanism, as well as a good mental concept of the sound he should be making, proper focus will result. (p. 96)

Because the vocal tract is so complex anatomically and acoustically, many problems about sensation and vocal quality remain unanswered. There is questionable evidence

that in singing, the vocal tract should be free to respond dynamically by being spacious and without constriction, and the tone should be properly focused; and the singer who bends his efforts to these ends will almost certainly be rewarded with a noticeable improvement in vocal quality.

(p. 99)

[It would be hard to find a voice teacher who recommended singing with a closed throat. "Open the throat" is almost as frequently heard as "Support the voice," "Sing on the breath," or "Place the voice." These expressions have the potential for inducing malfunction in singing because they are imprecise. Just as the singer must concretely understand how the tone is "supported" (how the rate of breath emission is determined), so must the singer know what to experience as "the open throat." At best, subjective expressions can be but vague indicators of specific concepts. Such adages can mean many things to many persons. Vocal pedagogy could probably take a major step forward if these and other subjective terms were replaced with, or augmented by, more exact language.]

(p. 58)

Richard Miller

The Structure of Singing

Use of Specific and Consistent Terminology as a Strong Pedagogical Tool

Efficient and effective teaching is a science of exacting language. So, too, great pedagogy is a result of exacting decisions by teachers concerning the language used with students. One must make decisions to label vocal experiences and singing sensations in the choral rehearsal with

a single and, if possible, unique term. There can be a real imminent danger when pedagogical terms are tossed to the choir without clear definition as they relate to a vocal experience. Too many vocal terms not only makes the rehearsal inefficient, but it hopelessly confuses the beginning singer.

The general rule of thumb is **“Experience first and label immediately after the experience.”** One should never embark on a vocal concept in the choral rehearsal by explaining first. The adage “talk less” is one that should be carefully observed. Throughout these materials, exercises are presented for teaching purposes. Once the student has correctly experienced the vocal concept, it should immediately be labeled with a term carefully chosen by the conductor. In every repetition thereafter, the same term should be used; no other term should be introduced, even if the meanings are interchangeable. This specific use of terminology empowers both the teacher and the content. Language, then, is used as an accurate and efficient device for instant recall of pedagogical concepts. Efficient and spare language is the key to influential choral ensemble teaching. Many “images” may, and should, be brought into the rehearsal process. However, similar images for the same concept must be labeled with the same term—and no other. One adage that comes to mind is that children can learn anything provided it is logical. For both adults and children, that logic must be supplied by a lean and accurate vocabulary that has always been introduced with powerful sensations and singing experiences.

Allowing for Poor Singing Before Teaching

Another important concept in choral ensemble teaching is that teachers must allow the choir to experience the vocal concept incorrectly before teaching begins. This is also a secret to great teaching. Much pedagogical “pay dirt” is wasted by teaching first before the choir has sung. Allow the choir to sing as they are, almost like a pretest. After they have made an incorrect or improper sound, then begin teaching.

Choirs learn what something is by what it is not. By allowing them to experience an incorrect sound and then immediately experiencing the correct sound, they will feel and hear the difference. When that happens, the teacher’s work is, for the most part, done. All the teacher needs to do is accurately label that experience with the proper specific verbiage for later recall again and again!

Vocal Modeling: Pro or Con?

A word needs to be said about vocal modeling. Some of us are great singers, and some of us are not. If you are a skilled singer, always model first before attempting to explain specific vocal concepts. You may save yourself valuable rehearsal time, especially with young singers. If you are not a vocal performer, model to the best of your ability! I have found choirs to be extremely forgiving and kind! They will extract from your modeling what is good, and they always ignore what is not so good! While one should not rely solely on vocal modeling in teaching, it is a valuable tool in the teaching process.

Vocal Curricula

There are many approaches to performance curricula for school programs. Many curricula are built around a prescribed list of performance literature or a prescribed approach or method for the teaching of musical skill. Without doubt, an approach to the teaching of music literacy must be used. However, the other part of the curriculum must be a sequential method to the teaching of vocal technique. Essentially, a choral curriculum should be a reflection of the table of contents for this book. Faculties must make decisions on a consistent methodology, from beginning choirs to the most advanced choirs. Choirs often never realize their vocal potential because as they move from teacher to teacher, valuable pedagogical time is spent as the singers learn to translate from one pedagogical language to another. In the process, there is a loss of vocal technique that is hopelessly lost in the translation process. Literature should be the teaching material of any curriculum, but it should never be the exclusive content of the curriculum.

Relaxation: Deconstructing Posture Brought to the Rehearsal

When singers enter the choral rehearsal, they bring with them their personal accumulation of poor posture and body tensions acquired throughout the day to that point. In the beginning of the choral warm-up, the initial step is to perform activities that will take the posture in a direction of deconstruction: breaking apart the muscular rigidity and postural