

Vocal Pedagogy in the Choral Rehearsal: Becoming a Vocal Technician

BY KYLE J. WEARY

The goal: to develop healthy singers with healthy vocal technique. The problem: how to do this in the choral rehearsal, without losing those precious minutes of time needed for learning music.

Creating a unified, healthy-sounding choir is something that all choral directors strive to accomplish, but all conductors' training isn't the same. Sometimes there are gaps that need to be filled in the education of the conductor. The process of creating a healthy sounding choir is much like a doctor meeting a sick patient for the first time: first, one must listen to the choir before trying to determine what the problem might be. After listening, a diagnosis of the problem must be made, and this may include multiple hypotheses. Finally, the conductor must prescribe a plan of action for their students to correct whatever issues are found. Adding the fundamentals of vocal pedagogy into the rehearsal may seem like a daunting task, but starting with the basics is a good beginning. For me, these include:

- posture or body position,
- respiration,
- phonation,
- and resonance.

Teaching your choir these four basics can solve most problems that we find in a given choral rehearsal. For instance, if your choir constantly goes flat during a capella pieces, what reasons can you think of that would cause this to occur? Faulty breath support can be one cause. If the piece is in C major or F major, those pieces typically lie right in the first passagio of tenors and sopranos, making it very easy to go flat. This problem might be addressed by simply having the students use better breath support, or by singing in C sharp major or F sharp major.

Posture

Although teaching posture is a great way to begin the year, it's not too late to start teaching it now! Improper posture can cause flat-



ting and poor breath support. Posture is the root of everything when it comes to singing. If you aren't standing properly, you can't breathe properly. If you can't breathe properly, you can't phonate properly – you get the point. One common issue with a singer's posture can be directly related to the director's

own posture. If the conductor fails to have proper posture, the students will mirror often what they are seeing.

There are a few ways to teach students posture and for students to check their posture within the rehearsal setting. Having students routinely check both their own and a “buddy’s” posture may be enough to drill the idea of the importance of good posture into your students. If that doesn’t work, try placing mirrors in the front of the classroom (where your students will be able to see themselves) so they can check their own posture. Be aware that this may cause distraction for some students at first, but eventually they will be used to seeing themselves in the mirrors.

Body position can refer to posture, but it also takes into account the entire body. Body position is how we stand: feet flat on the floor with the body weight evenly distributed between both feet; feet roughly shoulder-length apart; knees relaxed (and not locked); the chest should be high before inhalation; and the head should be in line with the spine. It is important to recognize that because singing is an athletic activity, the body must have an alertness and intensity present. I also teach my singers that body positioning is the direction that our body takes when singing. For instance, when singing,

our lower abdomen expands out like a balloon, but it doesn’t fill up. Since the larynx is fully capable of moving in six different ways – side to side, up and down, and forwards and back – improper posture will cause muscular tension. If there is muscular tension because of poor posture, that can translate to tension in the vocal folds, which will affect sound quality.

Respiration

Teaching respiration is harder than most people think. We naturally breathe in and out all day,

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every day. Yet, continuously thinking about breathing habits while completing another task – such as singing – can be quite a challenge. Improper breath support can cause many issues, including flatting and faulty intonation. A quick fix for breathing is that the director must be the one to lead the group by example in good breathing habits. You might consider showing the students (and, when appropriate, telling them) where you would like them to breathe in a song. Generally speaking, when teaching a new singer how to breathe, you must

first teach them how you will indicate breathing to them.

Some of my favorite exercises to teach involve deep breathing. One such activity involves having students lie down on the floor and place a book on their stomach, and then asking them to breathe so they move the book up and down. This is a great exercise to teach our singers early on for a few reasons. First, our singers aren’t having to fight gravity when they are lying down on the floor, so they are quite successful when they are first learning this. Second, they are learning how to independently control their stomach muscles. Finally, they can visually see the difference in the type of breath they are taking with the book placed upon their stomach.

Differentiating between abdominal breathing and chest breathing is something that is imperative to choral singing. Typically, we advocate for abdominal breathing, but every so often there is a piece of choral music (or solo vocal music) that necessitates a chest breath from our singers. Another easy way to show students how to take a deep breath is by having them pretend that they are breathing through their belly button with a straw. This will give them the sensation that they are breathing from the bottom up and will hopefully help them take a proper abdominal breath, rather than a chest breath. Getting students to breathe abdominally without thinking is something that not only takes practice, but also takes time.

Phonation

Teaching phonation to students is often problematic, especially if the teacher isn’t a native of the area or completely familiar with the subtle dialect of the students. Improper phonation can cause a poor focus in the tone, and overly bright vowels can cause the choir to sing sharp. Teaching phonation to students must include the basic anatomy for the student to be a successful singer. Singers should understand the multiple components needed for good

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phonation, which include: the power source (the vocal folds); oscillator (the breath); and the resonator (the cavities within the head). Along with this knowledge, students should know that the lips, the jaw, and tongue are what determine the vowel sound. Opening the mouth and having a relaxed jaw that is dropped will help singers' phonation. Teaching the "inner yawn" feeling typically results in a good jaw position for singing.

Resonance

Teaching resonance to students is the most difficult task in group vocal pedagogy. A poor sound or lack of projection may be caused by poorly adjusted resonators. Fortunately, we can teach our students about this. The resonator is a secondary vibrator, not capable of initiating pitch. But it is capable of altering the amplitude and timbre of a pitch, for better or worse. The main objective of resonance is for space to be created, which allows the sound to be amplified through the cavities within the head. There are three main cavities that help amplify the sound: the mouth, the throat, and the nasopharynx. While most voice teachers will say that resonance should be felt, not all students have the same sensation when feeling resonance. Therefore, generalizing in the rehearsal will most likely confuse those students who are feeling resonance differently than other singers.

For students to comprehend resonance, they must experience it over and over again. Some students might feel it, which makes it easy to remember, but for those who don't, it can be hard to remember the experience, which is why repetition is important. Also, teaching our students one term and using it, rather than using multiple terms (for example, "placement," "focus," "ping," "ring," "singing in the mask," "nasal resonance," and so on) can help decrease confusion about this somewhat complicated

topic. Humming is a basic starting point for most resonance exercises. Sighing and yawning are also ways of teaching resonance. A good choral sound is one that is rich in resonance and is also characterized by a uniform vowel color, depth and fullness of tone, and projection.

Developing our students' voice is a task that won't be complete in one week, one semester, or even one year. We must continuously create new warm-ups and choose new repertoire to broaden the technique that our students use in choir and to keep their voice at the top of its game. Choral directors and educators who take the extra time to incorporate vocal technique into their rehearsals aren't just teaching music to be sung, they are teaching singers how to sing. 🎵

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Kyle has a bachelor's degree in Music Education and a master's of music in Conducting from Shenandoah Conservatory of Music, as well as Level III Certification in Somatic Voicework – The LoVetri Method – from the Contemporary Commercial Musical Theatre Vocal Pedagogy Institute. Kyle is a member of the American Choral Directors Association, the Conductors Guild, the Educational Theatre Association, Music Educators National Conference, Phi Mu Alpha - Sinfonia, and National Association of Teachers of Singing.



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