

Teaching Musical Literacy: Developing the Independent Choral Singer

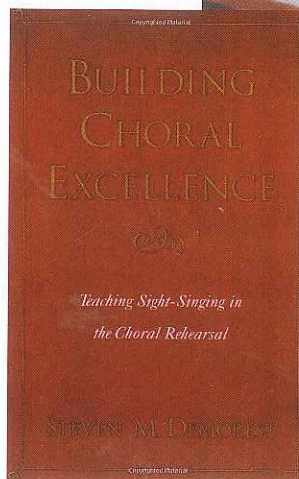
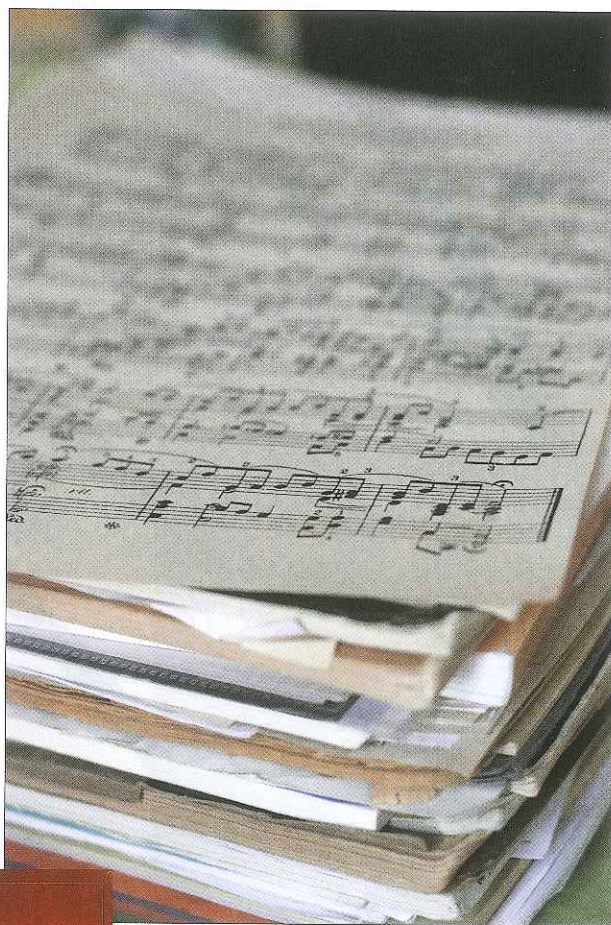
By Kyle J. Weary

While many instructors of choral music would agree with the notion of teaching musical literacy as part of educating choral singers, few choral instructors actually devote significant time to teaching musical literacy, suggests Dr. Steven Demorest in his 2001 publication, *Building Choral Excellence*. However, regardless of the many factors that impact whether or not a choral instructor teaches musical literacy, if a singer leaves the choral setting without learning how to be an independent musician, the choral instructor has failed to do his or her job.

Most teachers teach how they were taught, by pounding out notes in rehearsal. The issue with this paradigm is that unless we recognize the weaknesses of our own training, we will not teach our students any better than we have been taught. Those who teach musical literacy know that teaching students to be independent musicians ultimately saves time in rehearsal. Students are able to learn music much faster and, most importantly, without the aid of a piano, part cd, or learning by rote. There are many methods and approaches to teaching musical literacy to choral students. These systems must be divided into rhythmic patterns and pitch patterns before they are put back together. Dr. Don Ester notes that tonal and rhythm systems must serve the needs of the learning approach used by the teacher; they must not drive the approach or be the approach.

Best Practices - Rhythm

There are many methods or approaches for rhythmic patterns; I have found that the Takadimi syllables work best. Takadimi gives students a systematic approach to decoding music no-



tation, once they are ready to begin reading. Many prominent music educators have noted that students should be taught sound before symbol, but many materials sold and used for teaching musical literacy start with sight, rather than sound.

The Takadimi System was developed at Ithaca College as a method of tutoring students. Like the Gordon system, the Takadimi System is a beat-based syllables system, rather than notation based. The Takadimi System is relatively simple as it is only two related

sets of syllables: one for simple beat division and one for compound beat division. Unique to the Takadimi System is that every subdivision has a unique syllable. "In simple meter, any attack, regardless the notation, is called 'Ta,' and any attack on the second half of the beat is called 'di.' Further subdivisions are called 'ka' and 'mi.' In compound meter, 'ta' again represents an attack on the beat, and the syllables 'ki' and 'da' serve to articulate the divisions on the beat. Further subdivisions are 'va,' 'di,' and 'ma.'" I believe that teachers must first prepare the ear to help students develop a sound "vocabulary." Just like any other type of learning, teachers must create the proper sequence of instruction or student learning will be diminished.

Best Practices - Tonal

Jane Kuehne observed that in her research, middle school choral directors in Florida mostly agreed with using the moveable do system with exercises created by the teacher. Using a letter-based or fixed-do system may work for some students, but since most people do not hear in absolute pitches, one may conclude that establishing tonality in major, minor, and other modes (as needed) will stand to help the choral singer aurally, rather than establishing absolute pitch names. When students are taught using a fixed-do or letter-based system, they essentially must learn 15 different syllable patterns that are associated with 15 different key signatures. In contrast, if students learn using a moveable-do system, they must learn one pattern for major, one for minor, and then (if needed) the patterns for the church modes. The next factor that a teacher must make a decision on is on which minor system they would prefer to teach: the do-based minor system or the la-based minor system. Both have a place for sight-reading. I personally start with la-based minor because tonal patterns are easier to teach because of aural familiarity of the major scale. Conversely, using a do-based system, the tonic-dominant function of 'do-sol' is maintained, which also may help build students' aural awareness.

The use of the Curwen hand signs is a topic that is forever debated by choral instructors. Alan McClung found in his research that the use of hand signs only significantly enhanced the performance when the singer also had an instrumental music background; otherwise, the results were very close to each other. Janice Killian and Michele Henry note in their research that, students who used hand signs while sight-singing material score significantly higher on assessments.

Combining Tonal and Rhythmic Patterns

Carol Krueger, assistant professor of Music at Emporia State University, has developed a systematic approach for teaching both rhythmic and tonal patterns. The three phases noted below are all based off of the synthesis of her education and teaching career. In

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the three phases, skills are separated to simplify them, before we combine them. Phases One and Two teach the students to decode the music, while Phase Three teaches the students to encode the music.

Phase One - Rhythmic

This process will mostly center around rote teaching. The students will begin by imitating the teacher. The teacher should start with small beat increments (4 to 8 beats for simple meter and 6-12 beats for compound meter) to aid in their students' success. First, the teacher will speak rhythms on a neutral syllable while patting the beat and the students will echo on a neutral syllable (while patting the beat). This will take up very little of the choral rehearsal (two to three minutes daily). After the students are able to successfully complete step one, they will begin step two. In step two, the teacher will pat the beat and speak rhythms using the Takadimi syllables and the students will echo on Takadimi syllables while patting the beat. Once students

are successful at step two, they will continue to step three. In step three, the teacher will pat the beat and speak rhythms on a neutral syllable and the students will pat the beat and echo on the Takadimi syllables. The students will be ready to enter the reading phase, if they are able to successfully complete step three. If they are not able to complete step three, the teacher should return to the first step and repeat the final two steps.

Phase One - Tonal

For teaching tonal patterns, the teacher should start by singing on a neutral syllable, these patterns (starting with three notes, there are only 12 possible patterns to sing) and the students will sing those patterns back to the teacher. After the students are able to successfully sing these patterns, then the teacher will sing the same patterns

using solfège syllables, while using the Curwen hand signs, instead of a neutral syllable. After the students are able to successfully sing these patterns, the final step is the teacher singing the patterns on a neutral syllable and the students will echo with the proper solfège syllables and Curwen hand signs successfully.

These three steps are not all done in a row, but they are practiced over time. Each of the steps should take no more than two to three minutes per class period for students to be successful. If the students are able to complete step three successfully, then they are ready to move onto preparing for reading notation, but if they are not able to successfully complete step three, then the teacher must go back to step one and start over. After this is completed, students are then ready to move onto symbolic association.

Phase Two

Once the students are able to successfully listen to a rhythm or melody

on a neutral syllable and then decode what they hear and then are able to perform that rhythm or melody on the taught syllables, they are ready to begin reading. The students will now learn to read and write the patterns they learned in phase one. The students must be reminded to feel the beat with rhythms, and use hand signs with melodies. Now, students will reunite rhythm and melody together following the written notation. Krueger notes that students should focus on reading groups of notes (patterns) rather than a series of individual of notes.

Phase Three

In phase three, students will strive to read and write with complete musical comprehension.

Materials

Steven Demorest, an authority on teaching musicianship within the choral setting, has done a multitude of research in the past 10 years. His surveys found there was no one single method book that was widely used in teaching. Most teachers end up creating their own materials, rather than purchasing ready made materials, because they are not always sequenced properly for certain teaching situations.

Rather than spending time on creating materials without a goal in mind, I urge teachers to use the repertoire that they have selected to teach musical literacy. Teachers should use repertoire to teach music skills, not teach the repertoire for performance reasons only. Creating a curriculum map will take time on the teachers behalf, but then all sight reading will directly relate to the repertoire. Students will move more quickly in the music because of the direct relation to the sight reading. Teachers should closely examine their repertoire selections and write out the different rhythmic and tonal patterns found in

the music. After the tonal patterns are created, teachers should write out the tonal line of each voice part. The tonal line will be every note, deleting repeated notes, without any rhythm. From this, the teacher will have a curriculum map based on the repertoire, allowing them to introduce the concepts in the repertoire without starting with the repertoire directly.

Assessment

Demorest notes that while completing his research he found that among teachers who regularly test and give students feedback in connection with group instruction, results showed significant improvement in individual sight-singing performance, even under different testing conditions. Demorest also suggests that teachers ask questions based on the score to individual

method of individual assessment to keep classroom instruction moving. In the rehearsal, Demorest suggests that utilizing quartet testing because of the similarity to sight-reading in a choral ensemble. He notes, each student is responsible for his or her own part; they still have to read in a four-part context and function as a member of a group. In addition, the singers get the benefit of a harmonic context to help the find their part. Charles Norris' research indicates that less than half of the states in the US have a sight-singing requirement as part of the assessments at a choral festival. With assessment, group reading can be a good point to ease into preparing students to be individually tests on their sight-reading abilities.

As music technology advances, there are other ways that teachers may be able to have instant assessment for



students (such as key, time signature, and so on) during the rehearsal process. Krueger suggested that students tape themselves (video or audio) for assessment procedures. Her suggestion was that the students could go into a practice room or other quiet location during class or at home to complete the assessment. While this method will add extra teacher time to grade the assessments, I believe that this is a good

students. Using SmartMusic software, instrumental students are able to play and be graded based on their rhythmic and melodic accuracy. As the technology and software advance, it will be easier for teachers to assess their students electronically, which will be more time efficient for all involved.

Students should have a mixture of both written as well as performance based assessment on musical literacy

skills. This will balance all types of learning, as well as give students more confidence in what they are learning. Utilizing written work may also help the teacher for when teacher absences are necessary, and when a music substitute is not available.

Suggestions for Additional Research

Research in many areas of music literacy, specifically, sight-singing, need to be researched more thoroughly. Three such areas are: sequence of learning, individual assessment; and large group festivals. In the age of assessment on teachers' progress and teaching ability, large group festivals are a good way to assess whether or not, a teacher is properly educating students, creating independent musicians.

Because of the detailed system for Florida All-State auditions, quality research, articles, and resources are available. The Florida Vocal Association's in-depth assessment that a singer must go through to gain acceptance into an All-State Choral Ensemble is quite challenging, but the directors themselves are the ones who created this audition sequence as a way to balance assessment. At the high school level, students must sing five tiered eight-measure examples for a total of 40 measures of sight-reading. At the middle school level, there are three tiered eight-measure examples for a total of 24 measures. Upon completion, a written musicianship exam is completed. This exam covers topics including vocabulary, aural skills, and theory identification.

Conclusion

The research shows that many choral instructors believe in the importance of teaching musical literacy to their singers. Many choral instructors who do not teach musical literacy to their students either believe that they do not have the time in their rehearsal to teach it, or they simply do not know how or where to start. If more people knew about Kruegers' system and approach, many teachers would move quickly to the Takadimi method and her approach for teaching students sound-before-sight. As the focus on teacher assessment continues, I hope that teachers start holding each other accountable for what our students should be learning – to be an independent, lifelong learner and enjoyer of music.

An active presenter and music educator, Kyle Weary is the Vocal Music Department lead teacher for the Barbara Ingram School for the Arts in Hagerstown, Md. Kyle has experience teaching both secondary and elementary levels as a music and drama teacher. Recently, Kyle's high school choral ensemble had their first Carnegie Hall appearance singing under the direction of Eric Whitacre in the premiere of his new opera: "Paradise Lost: Shadows and Wings," as well as having the opportunity to sing as the backup choir for Todd Rundgren's fall 2010 tour. Kyle has a Bachelor of Music Education (vocal emphasis) and Master of Music in Conducting from Shenandoah Conservatory of Music.



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