



CHORAL SINGING AND THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE CHORAL DIRECTOR (1964, Revised 2009)

The American Academy of Teachers of Singing offers the following advice and recommendations on the subject of Choral Singing and the responsibility of Choral Directors for the vocal well-being of the members of their groups.

For many years now, choral singing has made great strides in American high schools, colleges and universities. Likewise, church choirs, community choruses and oratorio societies have evidenced a keener interest in fine choral literature and stylistically improved performance. Commendable as this may be, quality has not always kept pace with quantity and the reason for this lies with the leadership. A director of a choral group, including the organist-director, must have the qualities of leadership, musicianship, imagination, discipline and knowledge of the literature. However, if a director does not have a complete understanding of the human voice and its development, he or she lacks the most essential qualification for success

The public cannot expect good tone, good blend, a free and natural emission of sound with respect to correctness of vowels, eloquent diction and inspired expression from a group whose director who does not have an understanding of the functioning of the voice itself. The choral director is responsibility for the tone quality of his choir and the vocal health of his singers. He must have a sufficient knowledge of vocal function to correct unmusical tone, faulty pitch, incorrect vowels, bad diction and vocal straining. These do not become beautiful by multiplication. Only by proper vocal training can a singing group ever hope to achieve even modest success. This leaves no room in the field of choral direction for those who have not had thorough and correct vocal training themselves.

The tone of a chorus or choir can be correct and of beautiful quality only when the principles that govern good singing are strictly adhered to and faithfully put into practice at every rehearsal and every performance. These principles are in no way profound nor are they new, but the fact that they are often disregarded is evident in the performance of many American choruses. These principles are:

I. An Alert Mental State.

A choral director must have a clear mental concept of the desired result.

II. Posture.

Tone is result -- not cause -- and therefore its quality is determined before sound is heard. The choral singer needs to realize, or be taught, that a state of mind and a subsequent state of body must precede the attack -- the actual onset of phonation. He must be made aware that physical readiness (posture) and mental alertness is to a singer what an instrument in good condition and perfectly in tune is to the orchestral player.

III. Breath.

Assuming that posture is correct, the inhalation of natural energizing and vitalizing breath follows. This means diaphragmatic breathing with inhalation through both mouth and nose. This completes the state of readiness prior to phonation. Breathing exercises have a place in the vocalizing period preceding the actual rehearsal of the music. This period of vocalizing should include staccato attacks and work on legato scales. Florid passages sung with an "h" sound before each note may be encouraged by some musical stylists, but these are innately less musical and hinder the development of good vocal technique.

IV. Attack.

The instant tone is produced it must be right. It must be heard mentally before the act of phonation. Tone must be free, musical and on pitch. A good choral director has a mental concept of a correct attack and, if what he hears from his group fails to satisfy this concept, he must then have the knowledge, understandable terminology, and vocal ability to demonstrate by example exactly what he expects from his singers. Illustrations are far more effective than explanations and consume much less time. A good preparatory beat on the part of the director is essential to achieve a good attack. This preparatory beat (before the attack) must be within the rhythm and mood of the composer in rehearsal.

V. Vowels

Choristers should be taught the correct phonetic sound of every vowel. The vowel is the singer's only means of sustaining sound and since vowels consume about ninety-eight per cent of vocalizing, it is clear that correctness and uniformity of vowels are to be insisted upon if eloquent diction and a good sound are to be achieved. Vowel exercises, therefore, should always have a prominent part in the period of vocalizing prior to the actual rehearsal of choral literature. Choristers will establish a mental concept of correct vowel sound far better and much sooner through the practice of vowel exercises than they will in the singing of program material only.

VI. Choral Enunciation

Choral enunciation makes additional demands upon the singer. Intelligibility of a choral text depends upon the clarity of the vowel (previously discussed), understanding the structure of the language, and crisp consonant articulation. An analysis of strong and weak word forms, and strong and weak syllables within the text will improve diction alone, while avoiding overpressurizing consonants. Of course, crisp consonant articulation is of paramount importance, but should be achieved with a minimum of tension carried over into the vowel. Consonant articulation exercises can be made part of the choral warm-up sequence.

VII. Blend and Balance

Choral blend and the balance of individual voices are an essential component of the choral experience. However, the attempt to have all voices imitate one voice, the prolonged use of vibrato-less “straight” tone and other methods for negating the individual voice cannot be condoned if vocal tension and strain result. Free emission of tone by each individual singer need never be sacrificed in order to achieve good choral singing. A vocally trained choral director by instruction and example can achieve blend and balance without strain. Creative seating arrangements with variation from rehearsal to rehearsal can help in this regard.

Choral singing can be a fine mental discipline, a perpetual cultural asset, and the healthiest of all recreations. In order to realize this, however, singing must be correct and free from strain and tension. This is the responsibility of the director and no choral ensemble can hope to endure and prosper if the director is without skill and experience sufficient to diagnose and correct vocal faults individually as well as collectively. The human voice is a delicate instrument and subject to serious, even permanent injury, when its development is placed in the hands of uninformed leadership. We can hope for a better day in choral singing when directors of such groups shall know the basic principles which concern the correct use of the voice, and have the knowledge and skill to train and develop the individual voice.