

CHORAL SINGING AND THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE CHORAL DIRECTOR

The American Academy of Teachers of Singing offers the following recommendations and advice on the subject of Choral Singing and the responsibility of Choral Directors for the vocal welfare of the members of their groups. It is a subject that is of vital importance to the young singers of our country.

During the last forty years choral singing has made great strides in American high schools, colleges and universities. Likewise, church choirs, community choruses, and oratorio societies have shown a keener interest in the better type of choral literature and the improved performance thereof.

Commendable as this may be, it remains a fact that quality has not kept pace with quantity. The reason for this does not lie with the material at hand, but with the leadership. A director of a choral group, and this obviously includes the organist-director, may have many shortcomings or faults. He may lack leadership, musicianship, imagination, aggressiveness, or he may be an inept disciplinarian. Obviously he needs all these qualities but if he has no understanding of the human voice and its development he lacks the most essential qualification for a successful choral director. Sir Henry Wood states clearly that he, not originally a vocal student himself, deemed it imperative to study voice and master its basic challenges before he would presume to conduct vocal performances.

It is wholly unreasonable to 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 is without an understanding of the functioning of the voice itself. The choral director is responsible for the tone quality of his choir. He must have the vocal knowledge to correct unmusical tone, faulty pitch, incorrect vowels, bad diction, and vocal straining. These do not, by some miracle, become beautiful by multiplication.

With the possible exception of professional groups, scrambling a choir into individual quartets is at best a questionable procedure. With an amateur group of untrained voices it is a waste of time and effort. In the first place this seriously impairs a conductor's cueing in of parts, dynamic shading—particularly in polyphonic music—and interpretation. Furthermore, it rules out the development of blend within the individual sections. All members of a given section (soprano, alto, tenor, bass) should sit or stand in a group and be placed within the group with care and discretion by the director. Only thus can singers listen to members of their own section and develop uniformity of tone quality, correctness of vowel, and musical accuracy.

The practice of having all voices within a section imitate any one voice is likewise not conducive to good choral tone. In the singing of "forte" passages this becomes particularly noticeable. Natural, free emission of tone by each individual need never be sacrificed in order to achieve the desired result in choral singing. A student of singing should be encouraged to participate in choral groups, but only if by doing so he can, as an individual, enhance his vocal development, free from strain or tension. In such groups where "imitation", the so-called "straight tone," or other dubious methods are practiced he has nothing to gain and much to lose.

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 directing for those who have not had thorough and correct vocal training themselves.

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; it must be musical and it must express truth. 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 only 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.

The tone of a chorus or choir can be of beautiful quality as well as correct only if and 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 so often flagrantly disregarded is only too clearly evident in the performance of many American choruses. These principles are: —

I. An Alert Mental State (A clear mental concept of the desired result)

II. Posture (Prerequisite — An alert mental state)

Tone is result — not cause — and therefore its quality is determined **before** sound is heard. Here the orchestral player teaches us a lesson. He will see to it that his instrument is in good condition and perfectly in tune **before** he begins to play. On the other hand, the average chorister does little more than open his mouth and let come what may. He does not realize, nor is he taught, that a state of mind and a subsequent state of body must precede the attack — the actual beginning of phonation. He is usually not made aware of the fact that a state of mental alertness and subsequent physical well-being (or readiness) is to the singer what an instrument in good condition and perfectly in tune is to the orchestral player. Since choristers are usually people with far less training than orchestral players, the need for vocal experts as choral directors is all the more obvious.

III. The Breath (Prerequisites — An alert mental state and good posture)

Assuming that posture is what it ought to be, the inhalation of natural energizing and vitalizing breath follows. This means costal, 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. The period of vocalizing should include staccato attacks and work on legato scales. Florid passages sung with an “h” sound before each note are never musical, nor is it ever necessary in order to establish accurate, clean-cut note progressions. Furthermore, it tends to develop a breathy tone.

IV. The Attack, or the Start of the Tone (Prerequisites — An alert mental state, good posture, and correct breathing)

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. Vocalization that seeks to improve or correct itself in the process of phonation should not be tolerated. A good choral director has a mental concept of a correct attack and, if what he hears from his group fails to satisfy his 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 composition in rehearsal.

V. **The Vowel** (Prerequisites — An alert mental state, good posture, correct breathing, and correct attack)

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 98% 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. Consonants are important too, but no amount of care in pronouncing them can make for good diction if correctness of the vowel sound is disregarded. 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 sounds far better and much sooner through the practice of vowel exercises than they will in the singing of program material only.

It is of course impossible merely to **explain** the correct function of these principles. Singing requires much more than **information**. It requires **information** converted into **action**. Accordingly the American Academy recommends that the director of a choral group should know, understand, and be able to demonstrate by example just how these principles may be put into practice, and bear fruit in terms of better choral singing and greater enjoyment for its participants as well as for those who listen.

Choral singing offers the opportunity of participation to more persons than any other form of art. If and when the time comes that the directors of choral groups will be men and women capable of training and developing individual voices correctly (besides having the other necessary qualifications as conductors) quality will more nearly keep pace with quantity.

Note: The use of the term "correct" as regards vowel sounds carries with it the recognition of the established principle of modification of vowel sounds in certain parts of the overall voice range.



AMERICAN ACADEMY OF TEACHERS OF SINGING

The American Academy of Teachers of Singing was founded in 1922 by a small group of representative and nationally known teachers of singing, with the purely altruistic purpose of doing what lay in their power to further the ethical and cultural interests of the profession. They laid no claim to any special qualifications which might not be equally the possession of other teachers, except perhaps their long years of successful personal effort; but they believed that a small body of earnest men, inspired by a common motive, could accomplish much for the profession which was not possible to them as individuals. The successors of the original group have striven to remain aware of the tradition of service established by the founders and to measure up to its responsibilities.

The activities of the American Academy have been pointed always along the lines of comprehensive, discriminative and tolerant consideration and discussion of the many complex and debatable subjects abounding within the sphere of the teaching of singing, vocal repertory and other closely associated features. The services of Academy members as adjudicators of vocal auditions and competitions, and as advisers to teachers and singers alike in the voice field are constantly sought after. From its membership, also have come leaders in other major organizations of vocal teachers in the United States.

The Academy's publications are the result of intensive and extensive work by committees whose reports are given critical consideration by the entire membership. On approval by a majority, these reports, in the form of pronouncements and song lists, are published. The expense of preparation and distribution is, in the main, met by the membership.