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The Choral Director as the Primary Voice Teacher

Strengthening Your Choral Singers' Vocal Technique through Vocal Pedagogy

By NAFME Member Sasanna Botieff

So here's the thing, if your students can say *Tyrannosaurus Rex*, then they can very well say *Cricoid Thyroid*.

Last November, I was honored to present the session "The Choir Director as the Primary Voice Teacher: Strengthening Your Singers Vocal Technique through Vocal Pedagogy," at the 2016 NAFME National In-Service Conference in Dallas, TX.

If you attended my session, thank you for taking the time to join me. I hope you were able to leave with a better understanding of vocal pedagogy and how to implement that knowledge in your classroom. If you were not there, I am sorry that you missed out on my awesome jokes, but no worries—you didn't miss out on the information. Included in this blog is a link to the PDF of my session's handout (<https://nafme.org/wp-content/files/2017/02/Botieff-The-Choir-Director-as-the-Primary-Voice-Teacher.pdf>).



(<https://i0.wp.com/nafme.org/wp-content/files/2017/04/2016-ANHE-Choir-2-750x500.jpg>)

Photo by Victoria Chamberlin | www.victoriachamberlin.com

Bringing Vocal Pedagogy into the Classroom

Vocal Pedagogy is the study of the art and science of voice (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voice>) instruction. It explores what singing is, how singing works, and how proper singing technique is accomplished. (Wikipedia)

"The reason for investigating how the voice operates is to avoid muddled notions that make learning to sing more complex than it ought to be." (Miller, 2004, pp. 222)

Vocal pedagogy can be learned at any grade level as long as the delivery is structured to its audience. We have to meet the students where they are so we can guide them to the next level. Kindergartners can understand that "singing is not yelling." Rollo Dillworth said, "Kids only think a rhythm is hard if you tell them that it is." I feel that this concept can apply to all the "hats" we wear as choral directors. Teaching vocal pedagogy to elementary students creates understanding difficulties only if we make it difficult.

Start by building a shared vocabulary: do not be afraid of using "big" or "scientific" words. Be proactive: choose 2-3 main concepts/vocabulary words and incorporate them into your daily routine (i.e. warm-ups: feel the lift in your sternum). And most importantly: Meet your students where they are.

Putting My Money Where My Mouth Is: Vocal Pedagogy in Practice

Lifting the soft palate, the vocal pedagogy way. It is not enough just to know the components of the vocal process. Efficient singing is better achieved when students know how the vocal components function. Furthermore, students need to experience what efficient singing *feels* like.

We find ourselves telling our students, “lift your soft palate,” but in all honesty, if you haven’t told your students where the soft palate is, then they will have no idea what you are referring to. It costs you merely 30 seconds to help them discover where their own soft palate is located.

When I take my kids through the soft palate discovery, I use assessable and descriptive words while interjecting the technical names we will be using in class. “Take your tongue and put it behind your top teeth, now slowly slide your tongue up. You will pass a big bump right above you teeth called the Alveolar Ridge, this is important to locate for diction purposes. Keep running your tongue up, you will feel a larger hard area called your hard palate. As your tongue continues up and then back, the hard palate will meet a soft squishy area. This area is the beginning of the soft palate, which continues back until it reaches that dangly thing in the back called the uvula.

Once they know where the soft palate is you can now progress to figuring how to lift the darn thing. To help my students feel and hear the effects of a lifted soft palate I have them sing while plugging their nose. If they get a nasal sound, it means the soft palate is not raised enough so air is escaping into the nasal cavity. However, the students who are able to sing with plugged nose with out the overt nasal timbre coming through have successfully raised their soft palate. YAY! (Note: if this exercise is done in conjunction with a [n] [m] or any other nasal consonant, the results will not be as clean cut.)

S/Z Ratio: Hey Look, a Moment of Cross-Curricular in the Choral Classroom

One of the questions of interest that came up in the Q and A at my session in November was how to tell when the adolescent voice is going through vocal mutation, or more colloquially, the voice change.

A great way to find out if the voice is functioning properly is to perform an S/Z ratio

It’s ridiculously easy to perform as long as you have a stopwatch and a calculator, which is a standard feature on most phones.

Ask your singer to take a deep breath and sustain a [s] sound for as long as they can. Record the amount; then repeat the process with the singer sustaining a [z] sound on any comfortable pitch. Studies have shown that between normal voices and voices experiencing dysphonia there is no statistical difference in the length of time of the sustained [s] sound. However, in voices experiencing dysphonia of any kind, the length of sustained [z] sound is significantly less than normal functioning voices. (Eckel & Boone, 1980. Hufnagle & Hufnagle 1988)

Calculating the S/Z Ratio		
Duration of 1 st [s]		seconds
Duration of 1 st [z]		seconds
Duration of 2 nd [s]		seconds
Duration of 2 nd [z]		seconds
Longest [s]		seconds
Longest [z]		seconds
Longest [s]/ Longest [z]	s/z ratio	seconds

(<https://i2.wp.com/nafme.org/wp-content/files/2017/04/SZ-Ratio.png?ssl=1>)

If the S/Z ratio is greater than 1.40, it is very likely your singer is experiencing some type of dysphonia.

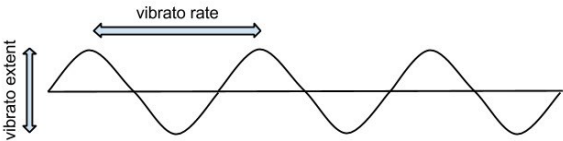
The great thing about the S/Z ratio is that you don’t have to sit there and individually test each student. You can pair your students up and have them test each other once they know how to perform the test. In under 20 minutes you could know who may be experiencing vocal difficulties, or if your adolescent girl singers are being plagued by the voice change.

Vibrato

The fun thing about vibrato is that scientists do not completely understand why or how it occurs. There are educated guesses but not substantiated research. However, this is what we do know.

Vocal vibrato is the rapid and slight variation in pitch. Vibrato is governed by two factors: rate and extent.

The vibrato rate and extent *can* be manipulated, however it can never be completely eliminated from the voice, only minimized. Manipulation of the vibrato can have a negative effect on singing efficiency.



(<https://i2.wp.com/nafme.org/wp-content/files/2017/02/vibrato-image.jpg?ssl=1>)

Two of the most common vibrato fails are either trying to create MORE vibrato or trying to sing with LESS vibrato in the “straight tone” school of thought. Both require the singer to put a lot of extra pressure on the vocal mechanism. Both manipulations can cause undue vocal strain and adversely affect the vocal tone.

Here are a few ways to explore vibrato and help fix/build healthy vibrato.

For healthy vibrato, the pressure needs to be lifted off the vocal mechanism. To do that try two exercises: The Ingo Titze straw singing technique and lip buzzing.

The Ingo Titze straw singing technique: Put a straw between your lips as if you are going to take a sip through it. Sing the pitch only through it. This technique “helps to keep the vocal folds slightly separated so that there is not a strong collision between the vocal folds. That in and of itself is beneficial and allows one to use full lungs pressure and a full range of pitches without incurring any injury.” (Titze)

Lip buzzing (aka lip trills and bubbles): Blow air through your lips to make them vibrate/buzz as if you were playing a brass instrument. You can sing an exercise on a “lip buzz” and then back to the words. You can also go back and forth while singing a song between words and the lip buzz.

Exploration of different amounts of vibrato: If 1 is the most minimized vibrato you can get and 10 the most operatic vibrato you can achieve, how would each in turn sound? How would a 5 sound? A 7? This is a safe way for students to try different sounds together as a class.

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Photo: Laura Tekunoff

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Botieff received her M.M.E. in Choral and Vocal Pedagogy from University of Kansas and her B.A. in Music Education with a Choral/Vocal Emphasis from California State University, Fresno where she graduated as a President's Scholar.

Brendan McAloon (mailto:brendanm@nafme.org), Marketing and Events Coordinator, February 3, 2017. © National Association for Music Education (NAfME.org (<http://nafme.org/>))

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