

September, 2001

Attaining a good choral tone (Part 4 – matching vowels)

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As mentioned in the previous articles in this series, attaining a good choral tone requires your commitment of time, breath energy, and accurate focus of the tone. Tackle these and you're on your way to success. However, good tone also requires singers who pronounce the text uniformly. Singing happens in the vowels. It makes sense that the way the choir pronounces those vowels would have a great impact on tone.

When we talk, our speech is rapid and we give little thought to pronouncing the vowels. We don't stay on them long enough for it to matter so much. The vowels are the sustained element of singing, so the way we pronounce them when we sing is of utmost importance.

For singers to match vowels as a group, the director must demonstrate them effectively. First determine what vowel sound is needed and then find a way for your singers to replicate that sound. It's up to you to make sure they are all pronouncing those vowels uniformly.

Our American language is a tricky one to sing. Most of our vowels have many different pronunciations. For instance, the "a" vowel can be pronounced in multiple ways: cat, came, calm, care. What most most students don't realize is that the lips and outer mouth play a minimal part in pronouncing these different vowels. The shape and the position of the tongue and the rise and fall of the soft palate is what determines the sound that is produced. I usually demonstrate this concept to my singers by having them shape their outer mouth in an oval shape. I then have them put their forefinger on one side of their mouth and the thumb on the other side. Making sure the finger and thumb don't move, I then have them say the five traditional vowel sounds, ah, eh, eee, oh, and oo. I point out that for all these sounds the outer mouth should stay in the same position. Students are often amazed to find they can pronounce all five sounds without changing the shape of their outer mouth.

While consonants require us to move our lip and outer mouth area, the mouth should stay open in a nice oblong oval when singing the vowels. Too much movement of the outer mouth could indicate that the singers are changing the vowels too much to maintain a consistent tone. I encourage use of the mirror to check on maintaining that oval shape as much as they can, no matter what word they are singing.

You as the director will have to act as your students' mirrors. Watch them for consistent mouth shape and you'll find their combined sound consistent.

The presence of diphthongs makes the American vowels more difficult. Diphthongs are vowel sounds that are comprised of two sounds pronounced together quickly. For example, the long "a" sound is actually comprised of two sounds. . "eh" and "ee." Other examples are the long "i" sound ("ah" and "ee"), the "ow" sound ("ah" and "oo"), the "oy" sound ("aw" and "ee"), and the long "o" sound ("aw" and "oo").

If you analyze each of these dual sounds and pronounce them slowly, you will notice that in every case, the first sound is an open one and the second sound is a closed one. To avoid "chewed vowels," singers should sustain the first, open part of the vowel and refrain from putting the second, more closed vowel sound on until the very end of the word.

Consistent consonant sounds are also necessary for good choral tone. But since few of our consonants are sustained, consistency with consonants is easier than with vowels. The consonants that present problems to the young singers are the ones which can be sustained on pitch . . . l, m, n, r, and w, and the ones that can be sustained without pitch. . . f, h, and s. Knowing how to phonate them together, sustain them the correct length of time, and cut them off together is something with which you as the director will need to assist them.

Of the four steps necessary for good tone. . . (1) time and effort; (2) proper breath management; (3) proper focus of the voice, and; (4) pronunciation of the vowels and consonants, I believe the fourth one is the most important.

One difference between instrumental music and vocal music is the text. Clear pronunciation is vital. The difference between singing in a choir and singing as

a soloist is that the singer must learn to adjust his or her voice so that it fits with the group. Pronouncing the text consistently with other members of the group is a large part of that responsibility.

These four steps, while not the “end-all” or “be-all” of a good choral sound, are an important part of it. By working at each of these steps you’ll be much closer to achieving that desired sound. You, the director, are the one who sets the measuring stick. Set it high and help your students reach the mark.