

April, 1997

Healthy singing for developing treble voices

By Rebecca Rottfolk, Artistic Director of the Northwest Girlchoir



As a singer, I long ago made a commitment to myself that should I ever conduct a choir, I would honor the vocal health of my singers.

Singers in my choir would not have to sacrifice their voices for a sound ideal that was contrary to beautiful healthy singing. One of the distinguishing characteristics of any choir is its sound.

That sound is determined by the conductor's understanding of what the voice can and should do. Especially when we are working with developing voices, we owe it to our singers to prepare them for a lifetime of singing enjoyment by teaching them how to use their voices in a healthy manner.

The following is a guide to help you achieve healthy singing with your students:

Healthy Singing for Developing Voices

What is a healthy sound?

*A healthy sound is
clear, not raspy, not in throat
unforced
round and natural in its own way
based on pure vowels
flexible
even throughout range
no funny vibrato (even, if any)
a combination of space (open throat) and having air pointed (focus)
supported by deep, centered flow of air.*

What is good vocal technique for young singers?

Ages 11 and under

In singers under 12 years of age there is very little connection to the body. Over-forcing "support" and going for too intense a sound can cause real problems with this age group. Good breathing habits can be established along with a sense of open throat, relaxed jaw, and an undriven, consistent tone throughout the range.

Care should be taken to keep voices round, natural, unforced, flexible and maintaining an easy lyric head tone.

Breathing exercises, posture, pure vowels, line and musical expression are emphasized. Much of this teaching can be done through good repertoire. Good music inspires singers to sing beautifully and expressively. It gives them reasons to manage their breath and to sing a gorgeous line.

Private voice lessons are not recommended. Instrumental lessons are strongly encouraged. (Research has shown that the most effective way to teach sight-singing is through piano instruction.)

Ages 12-14

Singers are still limited in their connection to their body, and girls voices are often more breathy and unpredictable throughout puberty.

Boys voices are in their glory at this age (right before they change) while girls are going through a less obvious transition but one which often confuses and frustrates them (along with life itself). Continue to work with breathing, vowels, line, etc., and to choose repertoire which develops the entire range. Balance repertoire selections in three-part harmony with good unison songs and two-part repertoire in which both parts sing equally high and low so “altos” don’t limit their range.

Intensive private voice training is not recommended. However, vocal coaching is helpful to work one on one with those who need special help with fundamental technique. Individual or small group lessons can also be an effective “self-esteem boost” for a young person in this sensitive age group.

Ages 15-18

As a more mature body develops, more serious vocal work can begin. Screen voice teachers to find those who have a sensitivity for young voices. Voice lessons are encouraged for voices which are becoming more developed.

In a program like the NWGC where singers in this age group are very experienced, are singing a lot, and are serious about their singing, vocal coaching through individual or group lessons could benefit every singer.

At this age we work to bring the tone into the body, adding warmth to the tone in a natural way. We focus on deeper breathing and connecting to the whole body.

“Singing a line” takes on a new meaning as one hooks up with the body. We work on “spinning a line” by singing legato songs only on vowels, connecting, smearing and channeling the sound into one dynamic line. This is balanced

with repertoire which requires precise articulation which helps singers sense energetic support.

The goal is always healthy singing that will serve our singers for a lifetime of music enjoyment and satisfaction.