

OMEA CONFERENCE, November 2019

The Recently Changed Voice

The challenges we and they face:

- In SATB and/or SAB repertoire, the Bass part provides an **essential** foundation for the choir:
 - It often provides the root of the chord, or at least the foundation of the chord
 - It allows tenors, sopranos and altos to tune their notes in “context”, am I on the third, the fifth or the seventh of the chord compared to the bass note?
 - Singers use just tuning, a strong bass section provides the fifth overtones other singers need to listen for to tune their own notes properly
 - Less basses in the choir and/or less men matching pitch makes the above very challenging for conductors and choirs
 - Men and women who cannot match pitch, often have “reluctant” personalities and are not your risk takers, men who can’t match pitch usually don’t’ easily falsetto either
- Most Public school choirs have a ratio of double the number of females to males in their choirs, sometimes this ratio is triple, and sometimes there aren’t any men, or they only have two or three basses in the choir.
- The basses and tenors in the Public School choir have pitch matching issues much more frequently than their soprano and alto counterparts.
- The bass section of the public school choir is often the section that is the most difficult to hear in performance, making the chords ambiguous to both the audience and the choir.
- Bass frequencies are lower and travel slower so basses have double the work to be heard and to sing on time in the music they are preparing. Pitch matching is usually a problem of small range. Most men who cannot sing, actually CAN match pitch, just two or three neighbor notes.

Why don't boys come out to choir?

- Many men are raised without singing as kids, women spend much of their childhood singing with each other, mothers and fathers sing with and to their daughters more than their sons.
- Many men are conditioned not to express their emotions, and nothing lays emotions more bare than using your singing voice, and using your face to express yourself.
- Singing is a very personal act, your voice is yours, no one else has that voice, it is a part of you. If something is wrong with IT, it feels like something is wrong with YOU.
- By the time boys who cannot match pitch arrive at our high schools, countless adults and students have told them to “mouth the words” and “not to sing”, and that they “CAN’T” sing, why would they ever join a choir? Bravo to those who did in spite of this!
- Even boys who could sing and loved singing as children, often experience a traumatic experience when their voices change, they have a new body and a new voice, and many have to relearn what they learned.
- Once the voice changes from soprano or alto, to bass or tenor, the kinesthetic vibrations in the throat, chest and head are completely different in this new voice. Children who matched pitch by feeling the vibrations, do not know what or how to sing with this new voice.
- Singing in front of young women can be fiercely intimidating for young men who are not sure of themselves and who this new “me” is to begin with.
- Although our society promotes young male singers in the media, and they are very popular, the media does not afford the same level of “cool” to men in high school who sing in a choir.

What can we do to help?

- Understand, and value the fact that these young men are there, they came out to sing in your choir in spite of all the odds, so good for them!
- Do vocal warm ups in EVERY rehearsal which teach them how to sing, boys who cannot match pitch in warm up will NEVER match it in repertoire.
- Intervene EARLY, get to your feeder schools and teach them to match pitch before they come to you, evaluate and place them in September, create a prep choir for kids who cannot match pitch and meet once a week.
- Create a men's only ensemble and a women's only ensemble, even with just small numbers, men will sing in front of each other more readily and then come back to SAB more confident.
- Give intensive extra help time to boys who cannot match pitch, once a week, with real goals and targets. Make matching pitch an expectation that is achievable, follow the same procedure in extra help sessions that your warm ups follow in choir.
- Follow the BODY-BREATH-VOICE procedure attached when warming up the voice for singing so the men learn how to "feel" with their new body and voice from the head voice down.
- Do top down exercises in your warm ups to encourage the men to approach singing from the head voice rather than the chest voice, only do bottom up exercises towards the end of the warm up.

If a) men can't match because they cannot FEEL singing not because they cannot HEAR singing and b) men actually CAN match pitch, just with a very limited range, then:

- Find the notes they can match right away and expand range from there
- Use the falsetto voice to experience "extreme" vibrations, it unlocks something
- Use the falsetto voice to experience "extreme" range, it unlocks their concept of singing and connects to when they knew how to sing
- Promote risk taking activities in your warm ups and extra help sessions, use extremes to unlock their personalities and voices, they often are not trying hard enough, not breathing very deeply or not really going for it when you ask them to sing higher pitches.
- Once a boy can descend on a sigh from falsetto voice to his regular range, something seems to "unlock" mentally and kinesthetically, and they can usually begin to match pitch after that, the rest is practice and hard work.

If you can walk you can dance
If you can talk you can sing...