Encouraging Young Tenors and Basses: A Pedagogical Approach

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OUTLINE

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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW:

Q: How many of us have wished that we had more young men in choir?

A: Probably all of us. If you haven’t, you will at some point!

We need tenors and basses in order to perform most common practice choral music. We can’t have a successful program without them, and though it is great when new young men join our singing ranks, wouldn’t it be nice if they all came with the training that comes from participation in a boy choir? This is a worthy dream!

Men and boys have sung sacred and secular music together throughout history, but the tradition is profoundly delicate – as illustrated in a quote from a June 2018 article in Britain’s *The Spectator* titled “I Dread the Extinction of Boys’ Choirs”: <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2018/06/i-dread-the-extinction-of-boys-choirs/>

*Forty-eight cathedrals in Britain now run separate girls’ and boys’ top lines, and three run mixed-voice choirs. There are now only 11 daily-singing choirs of men and boys left — four Anglican cathedrals, one Catholic one, four Oxbridge colleges, and two Royal Peculiars. As Britain is the only country in the world that maintains the medieval miracle that is daily sung services with psalms, responses, canticles and anthem, this means that there are only 11 choirs of men and boys left in the world singing daily. (Well, 12: St Thomas’s Fifth Avenue in New York has a choir of men and boys who sing five services a week, emulating the glorious British phenomenon.) The tradition of daily sung services has died out in France, Italy, Germany, Austria, Holland — in fact, everywhere*.

What is going on? Why don’t more young men sing? (group discussion):

Possible Responses:

-Lack of proper encouragement

-Not being exposed to music that resonates with them

-They just don’t think it’s cool

-Emotional and/or physical insecurities

-Potential social stigmatization

-Awkwardness and complication of changing voice

-Perhaps it’s a combination of these things

Challenges faced by young tenors and basses generally fall into the following two categories:

1. Psychological
2. Physical

All young voices may be divided into three broad categories. The categories are more apparent in young men because the changes they undergo are more dramatic:

1. The Unchanged Voice (prepubescent)
2. The Changing Voice (pubescent)
3. The Changed Voice (postpubescent)

Though we will discuss some aspects of the changing voice, today’s presentation focuses primarily on young tenors and basses who have braved this dramatic transitional period and blossomed into tenors and basses.

VOCAL PRODUCTION AND VOCAL WARMUPS IN REVIEW:

To provide proper framework, we will first review some essential concepts that are crucial for success with all singers, but which will find specific application with young men’s voices.

The Vocal Cycle:

-Volition (group warmup activity)

-Inspiration

-Phonation

-Resonation

-Articulation

Vocal Warmups: A Balanced Approach (PBOAT)

-Physical (group warmup activity)

-Breath (group warmup activity)

-Onset (group warmup activity)

-Agility (group warmup activity)

-Tuning (group warmup activity)

A SUBJECT OF CRUCIAL IMPORTANTCE TO YOUNG TENORS AND BASSES (CAN YOU GUESS?):

Having reviewed general vocal principles, we will now delve into an area of particular importance in the development of young tenors and basses. Let’s lay the groundwork by posing key discussion questions. As we talk, see if you can zero in on the specific subject that will become the primary focus of the session.

1. What is meant when we claim that a voice possesses a certain color?
2. What is actually happening to make this color?
3. Can we influence vocal color in those we teach? Should we?
4. What creates vocal color?
5. What is Timbre? How does it relate tocolor?
6. What external (non pedagogical elements) influence choices about tone color?

Voices do not create visible color. Though the concept can be pedagogically useful, it is purely imaginary. This pervasive idea of tone color is actually based on three concrete factors:

1. Placement of resonance or vibrancy – intentional or otherwise – within the vocal tract
2. The size and shape of the muscles, cartilages, bones, and spaces involved in singing
3. The amount of air allowed to be present in tone production

Have you guessed what our central topic for the day is?

PLACEMENT AND RESONANCE:

Vocal Placement (image):

Placement Scale: The higher the number, the higher the placement within the vocal tract

-Nasopharynx (4)

-Buccopharynx (3)

-Oropharynx (2)

-Laryngopharynx (1)

Group Exercise: *Four score and seven years ago*

Common Problems:

-Over Darkening (Descriptors: back, down, throaty, swallowed, dark)

-Over Brightening (Descriptors: forward, up, tinny, brittle)

-Nasality (obvious to listeners, but not always obvious to singer)

-Disconnection from personal hearing center (explanation)

-We hear ourselves differently than others hear us

-Aspirate or lax production (too much air…explain myoelasticity)

-Tense or muscular production (too much muscle and not enough air)

Group Exercise: Balancing air and muscle in onset and sustained singing

IN SUMMARY:

Helpful Hints:

-If you are comfortable with vocal modeling, do it

-Use examples and give listening assignments (provide examples from several styles)

-Sports compa­­risons (and others)

-Make friends with coaches

-Praise your singers

-Fixating will lead to burn out and mental shutdown (it has to be fun)

-Sometimes, just leave them alone and let them sing

-Don’t stop all the

-Be happy with small victories and let them know it

-Provide opportunities for Camaraderie

-Subject matter needs to matter

-Let them know how grateful you are for them (it takes guts for young men to sing)