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Reclaiming Group Vocal Instruction

Patrick K. Freer

Abstract – General music education began as a singing-based endeavor intended to improve singing in society. It later shifted toward an enterprise predicated on choral performance, particularly at secondary levels. The emphasis on choral performance in schools is problematic because it has pushed a large majority of students away from musical activity in school. At the same time, however, high standards of choral performance quality must continue. The question is not “who sings in our choirs?,” but “who no longer sings at all?.” This article is purposed to begin a discussion about an approach to group vocal instruction wherein singing reclaims its rightful place in music education.

“You won’t get what you want unless you want what you get.” That quote is a Yogi-ism, one of the many famous sayings of Yogi Berra, the New York Yankees catcher who was laid to rest in September.

“You won’t get what you want unless you want what you get.” What do we want as conductors, as teachers? What do we want out of this thing we call singing? What do we want out of vocal music education? Do we want success in the next performance, approval from our peer teachers, or the knowledge that we have prepared our students for lifetimes of singing and song? We *won’t* know the impact of much of our work. We won’t know, mainly because we’ll never see most of those students after they pass beyond our care. But, we will have been mentors along their unique musical journeys.

I owe much to two of my mentors. They did not know I considered them my mentors, mostly because I didn’t realize it until long afterward. One of my mentors was Helen Kemp, known in the United States as the “Mother of the Children’s Choir Movement.” Dr. Kemp was a professor at Westminster Choir College during my undergraduate days. I was fortunate to also have Frauke Haasemann as a mentor. Frauke was an expert in group vocal techniques for amateur adult choirs. I never realized how much these two women had influenced my work until I was in the middle of leading a workshop for middle school choral directors in Overland Park, Kansas. Somehow, in the middle of that workshop on a sweltering Friday afternoon in August, I realized that everything I was saying I had heard before from Helen and from Frauke. We are products of our teachers, much as *our* work with young singers propels *them* toward a lifetime of singing.

One of my two mentors passed away recently. Helen Kemp died in her sleep on August 23. She was active, articulate, and vibrant to the very end of her 97th year. Dr. Kemp gave several interviews in the final months of her life. I’d like to begin with one quote from an interview in April (2015a):

I always got myself into trouble by saying that everyone in my children’s choirs could come. Y’all come. That gets you into trouble sometimes because when *your* musical artistry wants to do something wonderful, then you have to do the next step of training, loving and caring, making them enthusiastic . . . not just for the musical end but for their personal being, their life.

So, what do we want and how do we get it? Some of our

profession’s leaders maintain that the repertoire is the curriculum. Repertoire is important. Many choral teachers choose repertoire because they love it, have sung it before, or because it’s been recommended to them. Rarely do teachers consider choral repertoire to be practice material for the well-planned, sequential development of singing skills. Let’s imagine that we choose a piece of choral repertoire that does not align with the vocal or artistic abilities of some singers in the group. We might respond by saying, “Well, that kid can’t match pitch, or he or she can’t do X, Y, or Z.” What if we were wrong? What if we only selected repertoire with technical demands beyond our students’ current capabilities? What if we chose keys that were impossible for some of the students because of their stages of vocal development? Over time, the effects on the musical self-confidence of those “marginalized singers” would be devastating, and there would be concurrent negative effects on the ensemble’s performance. We would have failed to take advantage of what these young singers could do, instead focusing on what they physically couldn’t do. Frauke Haasemann commented on this in the opening minutes of her *Group Vocal Technique* video (1991):

You have to give techniques to sing the music right, because some of the music that even amateur choirs sing is, in a vocal way, very difficult. You cannot say to the singers, “just do it.” You have to give them tools. And, I think that you have to teach them those tools.

The Problem

We encounter problems when we focus on the performance of choral music without emphasizing the underlying need to nurture the singing skills of all students. I know many choral teachers who audition their school ensembles to include only those students who already have the requisite vocal skills. This can occur when the performance of repertoire becomes the *raison d’être* of vocal-choral music education. It is contrary to what we call “education.” And that, I believe, has exacerbated some of our current issues with choral music’s appeal to singers and audiences. Yes, the singing of high-quality choral literature is a critical component of vocal music instruction in our schools and communities. But, we need to remember that it is a shift away from vocal music’s original place in schools. And, it is a reason that ever-increasing standards of quality choral performance can coexist with a diminishing pool of people who consider themselves to be singers.

The Potential

Vocal-choral music has the potential to attract massive interest in school and community music programs. It has a long history in schools, with several shifts in trajectory. During recent decades, one such shift has moved vocal music instruction away from generalized training and toward specialized performance, especially in choral ensembles. We need to retain the best of choral music education and strategically enhance vocal music opportunities for all students. Yet, the attention to technical excellence evident in today's school choirs may actually work against the broader goals of a music education intended for all students. Some in our community idolize choral performance standards at the expense of these wider educational goals.

Historical Context

The role of performance within choral music education has been the subject of concern since the beginning of the a cappella choral movement in North America. For example, in the 1920s and 1930s, emerging standards for United States high school choirs reflected performance ideals of eminent collegiate and professional ensembles. This could be seen in the work of Jacob Evanson, one of the most influential choral music teachers of that time, largely because of a performance of his high school choir at a national convention in 1928. It was written that Evanson was irritated by the attention generated by the public performances of his choir. He often tried to explain that his goals were educational, with performances serving only as demonstrations of the results.

Another significant shift in choral music education occurred in the mid 1970s when conductor Doreen Rao led the Glen Ellyn Children's Chorus in performance and workshop sessions at multiple national conventions of the American Choral Directors Association. These appearances redefined standards of excellence for choral music education – this time for elementary choirs. Rao later observed,

The value of music performance in music education can be found beyond the concert stage in the development of musicianship, the experience of enjoyment, and the psychological benefits of self-esteem (1993, p. 44).

The public and professional adulation for these children's choir performances prompted choral music teachers to adopt them as models, and, when the 1990s brought us the standards and assessment movement, children's choirs were held as exemplars of education through performance. And, yet, the children's choir movement inadvertently reinforced the emphasis on performance quality rather than on the knowledge and skills that young people can apply beyond their school's choral rehearsal room. Research indicates that choral teachers, elementary through high school, generally focus on preparation of a limited repertoire set at the expense of any other educational goals (Freer, 2011). A quick Internet search demonstrates that this is a worldwide concern of music teachers.

Choral Music as General Music Instruction

The current situation is the result of a change in the position of singing in schools. General music education began as a singing-based endeavor and later shifted toward an enterprise predi-

Choral singing has replaced general singing in our schools, focusing exclusively on genres and formats unlike those most people engage with beyond school walls.

cated on choral performance, particularly at secondary levels. Singing once served purposes of democratization and socialization in school culture, but current secondary school students hardly ever sing unless they are in choral ensembles. Choral singing has replaced general singing in our schools, focusing exclusively on genres and formats unlike those most people engage with beyond school walls.

The shift toward choral performance is problematic because it has pushed a large majority of students away from musical activity in school. At the same time, however, the increasing levels of choral performance quality must continue. We need to both support high-level choral performance *and* develop a framework for singing activity that involves a larger percentage of students. Singing is perhaps the one musical activity that can be engaged in by all and improved upon by all. The teaching and refinement of singing skills can result in high-quality choral performance, but it can just as easily result in musical learning beyond the rehearsal hall and concert stage. The time is right for singing to again serve as the fulcrum of general music instruction, with Western-style choral performance positioned as but one of several extensions for secondary school students.

Curricular and Artistic Balance: Educative Singing

This tension has existed since the advent of music education in schools. Teachers often find it difficult to achieve a balance between the broad goals of music education and the specific goals of performance-related instruction. Some odd curricular and pedagogical moments result. For instance, choral music teachers often look beyond repertoire when attempting to “cover” non-singing concepts such as music theory, history, and critical analysis. In these moments, rehearsal activity ceases and a completely different pedagogical experience ensues.

A more authentic approach is one wherein choral singing is but one component of broader vocal music activity. In this view, the study of singing and repertoire extends beyond specific notes, rhythms, and vocal techniques toward application of those skills in multifaceted musical endeavors within and beyond choral performance. Choral performance may be a group demonstration of musical knowledge and skill. But, an individual singer's ability to apply the learning *beyond* the performance signifies that it was a musically educative experience. Choral singing of the highest quality can be educative, but so can other forms of group singing as seen in cultures throughout the world.

I use the term “educative singing” when referring to school singing experiences in which feedback (whether from teachers

or peers) strengthens the knowledge and/or skills of the singer. The converse is “non-educative singing” wherein feedback relates merely to the performative realization of a choral score. Non-educative singing regularly occurs in choral performance ensembles operating as music education.

We can readily see non-educative singing when choral performance functions as a competitive sport. Our colleagues in physical education had this same discussion in the 1960s, though the conversation was about the role of competitive sports teams in school settings. The result was what we see in most schools today: all (or most) students have physical education classes during school hours, while the competitive sports teams select members through tryouts and hold practices after school. Physical education and competitive sport have found a way to coexist while serving the needs of all students. I suggest that music education has not yet achieved this goal.

Non-educative singing is also prevalent in our preparations for choral adjudications and assessments. I now live in a region where elementary choral teachers are encouraged and secondary teachers are required to participate in annual competitions known as “large-group performance evaluations.” These teachers face enormous pressure to have their choirs awarded high scores and they face the possibility of losing their jobs if the scores are not considered acceptable. For many of these choral programs, contests function much as the high-stakes assessments common in mathematics and reading. The important issue is the final score or ranking, not the educative and musical processes encountered by the students.

The effects of such evaluations and contests on student self-perceptions are well represented in the research literature. Research indicates that even young children are profoundly influenced by the results of these contests, whether the judges’ scores are positive or negative. And, other research suggests that such contests may not hold anywhere near the motivational value as teachers might commonly think.

I have served as an adjudicator for these events for many years. I am increasingly uncomfortable with my role, dismayed when I see school choirs rehearsing the same two pieces for months simply for the sake of a judge’s score, and disturbed by the sheer lack of joy in the competitive experience for both teachers and students. At one recent event where I served as judge, an elementary choral teacher stopped her ensemble during mid-performance, chastised a young boy for singing the wrong note, and turned to the audience to declare that the poor singing of that boy should not reflect negatively on the rest of the choir. The boy stood silently, tears streaming down his face, while the song began again.

Yes, this was one extreme example, but there is often very little joy, enjoyment, or enthusiasm to be found anywhere

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during choral competitions. Which is most important: the performance product or the educational process (see Freer, 2011)?

Reframing the Model of Male Singing in Choral Music

Here’s another example of the problem. I have spent my career working to improve the experience of adolescent males in choral singing. The most recent research in the United States indicates that female choral singers in secondary schools vastly outnumber male choral singers, and that the disparity is widening – not shrinking. Research also indicates that this has created a feedback loop where choral singing is perceived as a feminine pursuit. My own research overwhelmingly indicates that boys like to sing and want to sing in schools with their friends, but they are hesitant to do so without increased levels of male participation. Breaking that persistent cycle will be tough, but boys I’ve spoken with have offered many suggestions that could contribute to positive change. However, the seeming unpredictability of the male adolescent changing voice may prompt many choral music educators to give preference to female students who do not exhibit these vocal challenges. When boys are not taught to navigate their newly acquired singing voices with emphasis on physical skill and technique, there is potential for marginalization from singing throughout the lifespan. I believe we can transform this negative to a positive by drawing upon what boys tell us about their musical inclinations, desires, and abilities. The boy’s changing voice is not an unknown, a mystery, or an enigma . . . to those who know the research and related literature (Freer, 2015a). But, by definition, something is unknown until we learn about it. Teachers need to learn about the adolescent boys and their changing voices. My own story highlights this need (see Freer, 2006). It’s a story I’ve told frequently because it both grounds the problem and points the way toward a forward pathway.

I grew up in a rural community with one small school. I was the quintessentially musical child, volunteering to sing in class at each opportunity, waving my hands like I was the conductor at every concert I attended, and trying to sing harmony during the hymn sings at church. I joined the elementary choir in fourth grade. When I returned to school for my fifth grade year, my voice had begun to change; as I recall, it was a particularly rapid, unwieldy and not so subtle process. My music teacher told me to stand in the back of the choir and mouth the words. These were not instructions I wanted to hear. Believing that I could no longer sing, I immediately quit choir.

My parents enrolled me in piano lessons. I took to the piano with ease, breezing rapidly through the John Thompson series and onto the “real” literature. I stepped into accompanying when our church organist suddenly fell ill and I took over at the piano. Within a year or so I was accompanying for congregational singing, church choir, the community choir, community musicals, and various other functions. I realize now that in each of these instances I was involved with singing, except that I was not the one doing the singing.

A quirk of fate put me in the office of the choral director on my first day of college orientation. I had been heading to find my advisor in the pre-law program, but I had taken quite a wrong turn. The choral director asked me what I was majoring in.

“Pre-law,” I replied. He asked me if I wanted to become a lawyer. I replied, “not really.” He asked me what I really wanted to do. “Become a choir director,” I said. He then asked me why I was not pursuing music in college, to which I responded, “Because I can’t sing.” He said, “Well, let’s see if that’s really true” and proceeded to lead me through some vocal exploration activities.

The rest is history. It’s a history of a college student with a passion for singing and choral music. But, it’s a history that would not have occurred had it not been for the teacher who told me, “No, you can’t” and another teacher who later told me, “Yes, you can.” I was initially bitter about the lost years of choral singing and the camaraderie I might have had with fellow choir members. I didn’t excel at anything else that involved other school kids for the duration of my junior high and high school years. If I had shown athletic prowess, I might have joined a sports team or another such activity. What I wanted to do was music, and I couldn’t do that at school. So, I sought musical experiences outside of school.

Looking back on the situation, I realize that what I needed were the skills of vocal technique and a teacher who could teach me those skills. I needed to know how to manage my voice using the skills that were familiar to me as I confronted the new capabilities of my expanding voice. A host of recent research indicates that adolescent boys’ motivation for continued singing activity results from their self-perceptions of musical autonomy and vocal skill within a network of peer social support. That could all happen in a choir. But when school choral singing is not open to them, boys will seek musical support with their friends outside of school. Or they’ll simply quit singing altogether.

What Do Boys Say?

My research has born this out. I’ve interviewed boys in many countries and I’ve written extensively on their perceptions of singing and choral music instruction. I recently interviewed over 100 boys in five countries (Freer, 2015b; Freer & Tan, 2015). These included boys who considered themselves to be successful singers and boys who did not. Boys who knew that the voice change was a gradual, identifiable process were less likely to draw negative conclusions about their vocal quality than boys who lacked basic knowledge. They didn’t seem to care whether their teacher was male or female . . . they just craved information about their developing voices. Even when the information was non-specific, boys such as Dimitris (Greece, age 16) appeared grateful for any guidance at all:

I was trying to sing but I only had about three notes within my range. It was terrible. And I actually went back to my primary school music teacher for help. He told me that in like one or two years, the change will be complete. I was glad to hear that. I thought my voice would be lost forever, that I had done something wrong. He explained the real process.

Every one of the boys who considered themselves to be “unsuccessful” singers indicated that they would have been interested to learn about the anatomical process of voice change and its result on singing. Victor (Spain, age 13) withdrew from singing during the voice change:

Research indicates that young adults wish they had gained a wide array of musical skills in school rather than focusing on performance of a limited musical repertoire.

A lot of boys think it’s a big mystery. This is the problem. Maybe this knowledge could help, because a boy could understand that singing in a choir would be good for his voice.

Percy (England, age 15) agreed:

If boys were taught to use their voice instead just saying “get louder, sing higher, get quieter, do this, do that,” it would help a lot. Most boys who quit choir were never taught how to do that stuff and they’ll probably never sing again. Sometimes it’s like the performance is more important than the person.

Participants in these studies made strong statements about their desire for better singing skills, with many initially joining choir “for improving my voice.” Many boys of all ages and from all the countries expressed a desire for singing instruction to be separated from choral performance, especially during the time of voice change. Eoin (Ireland, age 15) said, “Just because boys want to learn to sing doesn’t mean they want to sing onstage in a choir.” In fact, that was the most frequent request of the unsuccessful singers – they wanted to learn in group voice classes rather than choirs that required public performance. In other words, these boys specifically requested skill-based instruction instead of repertoire-based instruction.

As Neo (Singapore, age 17) stated:

If you say to a boy or man singer in rehearsal “what you did is wrong” he won’t do this again. He’ll lose his patience. But if you say, “ok, that was good but try to do this to make it better,” then you make him more confident, and make him believe that he can sing better. That’s the most important thing.

Seeking Balance

That’s the most important thing . . . helping students sing better. If a goal of music education is to provide universal music instruction—and I suppose that’s an open question—then the currently enacted definition of vocal music teacher as choral director must change. Nothing bothers me more than teachers who fashion name badges proclaiming that they are the “Director of Choral Activities” at Lower East Peoria Middle School. Sure, we direct the choirs, but if we want to be taken seriously, let’s reclaim the title of *music teacher* if that’s what we signed up to do. Our professional identities need to embrace the breadth of vocal music instruction envisioned by pioneers of music education in schools.

Wouldn't it be great if we prepared students for many varieties of singing? What does it say about our art form when we only offer students one menu item . . . one type of singing experience, even when the students have the vocal skills to sing musics they love and even some that they haven't heard of yet?

Still, we know that many components of secondary education are not extended into young adulthood, and most individuals never reengage in similar activities as adults. Vocal-choral teachers must focus on the teaching of singing skills and techniques that can transfer across vocal platforms, genres, and activities. Research indicates that young adults wish they had gained a wide array of musical skills in school rather than focusing on performance of a limited musical repertoire.

A Caution

Is there a chance that we could take this too far toward a focus on vocal technique and away from the musical experience which includes an aural, sensual realization of a choral composition? Surely. In fact, that, too, has been an issue in our past. In a *Music Supervisors' Journal* article printed nearly a century ago, well-regarded pedagogue Charles Farnsworth wrote about the development of vocal technique:

The question is not whether we shall do or not such technical things, but whether if in doing them we constantly keep in mind the ultimate purposes they are to serve, and not let them become ends in themselves . . . Where we fail most is not in that we seek to give separate technical drills, but in that we do not unite the drills with their purpose—beautiful expression. We give the pupils the technical drill, but leave the most difficult part of the problem—its practical application—almost unpracticed (1924, pp. 59-60).

My hope is that we can more often reach the optimal balance between educative singing instruction and the application of those skills in repertoire. But, what about those students who excel within the current system of choral music education?

I am an active conductor of honor choirs where I work with young people selected by audition to sing tremendously difficult music extremely well. I love doing this, and I cherish the musical experiences I am fortunate to share with students across the globe. My role in these situations is to elicit the highest possible

level of performance from these choristers. How can I be an advocate for reform in choral music teaching while simultaneously promoting the highest standards of choral performance?

When I conduct a choir at Carnegie Hall, for example, the expectations of all involved are quite different than the expectations for performances given in a school auditorium or cafeteria. Or are they? Though the repertoire may vary and the instructional techniques that lead to the point of performance may differ, the two “choral experiences” should hold the same elements of artistry, goal achievement, collaboration, heightened aesthetic sensitivity, and musical satisfaction. Lower levels of musical satisfaction can be expected for all involved when repertoire or instructional techniques are not suitable for a particular situation. An exquisite amalgam of repertoire and pedagogy can evoke musical satisfaction in any choral setting (Freer, 2011).

Re-Balancing our Focus

The basic skills of phonation and singing are present in virtually every individual, and vocal-choral music pedagogy ideally amplifies those skills to permit engagement with other singers in the collaborative experience of performance. But only one kind of performance?

Here's an analogy. I have many Brazilian friends, and we'll often go to Brazilian steakhouses. Those are meat-centric affairs with only token nods to anything resembling a balanced diet. You get chicken, lamb, 19 kinds of beef, pork, sausage, and on and on. It's a cardiologist's nightmare. It's all meat. Many, many varieties of meat. Wouldn't it be great if we prepared students for many varieties of singing? What does it say about our art form when we only offer students one menu item . . . one type of singing experience, even when the students have the vocal skills to sing musics they love and even some that they haven't heard of yet? If we're in the business of teaching voice in group settings, we must pay attention to what we teach, how we teach it, and, crucially, what happens next. Students overwhelmingly report that they want to develop their singing skills. While some are happy to apply their newly acquired skills toward the singing of Western-style choral music, we know that most want to apply their skills in other singing endeavors.

Just as the infamous Emperor viewed his new clothing, we occasionally convince ourselves that a high level of choral performance quality alone somehow imparts the knowledge and skills necessary for a lifetime of making music. Even if that were true, it would only reach those who sing in choirs. We need to embrace the reality that singing instruction costs very little and can, therefore, reach massive amounts of people. The question is not “who sings in our choirs?,” or “who sings in our schools?,” but “who no longer sings in our schools?.” You know, I originally phrased that final point differently. It was “who doesn't sing at all?” But, that's wrong. All kids sing. It's just that many stop singing at some point along the way. We need to do something to counteract that problem. I believe we will begin by re-claiming singing instruction as central to the field of music education.

And so, we have two issues before us: First, singers' innate desire for a sense of control over their instrument; targeted group vocal instruction can influence the problem of attrition from school singing programs, especially with adolescent boys. And,

the second issue involves an expanded conception of the singing activity endorsed through our secondary school curricula; this can address the longstanding philosophical goal epitomized by the slogan, “Music for every child, and every child for music.”

We need the same foundational stance to address both of these issues. We need to develop a view of vocal-choral instruction where the singer is the constant, and teachers come and go along the trajectory of that singer’s life. Singers are not “our” students and choirs are not “our” ensembles . . . rather, we are “theirs” for brief periods of time and at formative moments in their development. Their voices and their singing belong to them. Their singing began long before we entered their lives and will hopefully continue long after our interactions have concluded. If we’ve done our job.

I’d like to close by quoting again from Helen Kemp. In her final interview on May 8, 2015, she was asked about her trademark educational mantra, “Body, Mind, Spirit, Voice, it takes the whole person to sing and rejoice (2015b).” Dr. Kemp commented, I even used that phrase with my “Senior Singers” choir that ranged from 70 to 80 years old. The same things can apply. Singing is physical, mental, spiritual (that means expression), and vocal. They have to go together. I’m now 97 years old. People are living a lot longer – they have a lot of years to do things that they love.

Let’s do our job – nurturing the bodies, the minds, the spirits, and the voices of all youngsters so that they each can know lifetimes of singing and song.

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