

# Choral Conductors and Voice Teachers: Finding Common Ground

*Matthew A. Ferrell*

Concepts of choral and solo singing diverge among the masses of pedagogues, teachers, and conductors who have differing opinions about healthy vocal technique and training. These differences have generated tension within some university music programs, with choral faculty and voice faculty sometimes on opposing sides.

In 2010, this author published a doctoral essay titled *Perspectives on Choral and Solo Singing: Enhancing Communication between Choral Conductors and Voice Teachers*. The essay presents discussions from professional singers, voice teachers, and choral conductors, surrounding healthy vocal technique while singing as a soloist and in a choir. Participants interviewed for that document were asked to recognize the similarities and differences between choral and solo singing, and identify vocal challenges for the solo singer that may arise when singing in a choir. The aim of the document was not to defend a particular side, but to identify the causes of contention that have negatively impacted some students' experiences in vocal music at the collegiate level.

In July 2010, the National Association of Teachers of Singing Fifty-First National Convention in Salt Lake City presented a session titled, "Solo/Choral Singing: A

Symbiotic Relationship." The session included a panel of seven choral conductors and voice teachers speaking on a topic closely related to this article. In his introduction to the session, Allen Henderson, Executive Director of NATS, identified the need for such a discussion. "This session has grown out of a joint concern and a joint opportunity for us to collaborate with our choral colleagues in ACDA [American Choral Directors Association]."<sup>1</sup> Much of the information provided in the NATS session was published in three articles found in the *Choral Journal*.<sup>2</sup> The panel discussion is similarly incorporated throughout much of this article.

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<sup>1</sup> Allen Henderson. Solo/Choral Singing: A Symbiotic Relationship. Joint Session presented at the National Association of Teachers of Singing Fifty-First National Convention, Salt Lake City, UT. July 2-6.

<sup>2</sup> Sharon Hansen, Allen Henderson, Scott McCoy, Donald Simonson, and Brenda Smith. "Choral Directors are from Mars and Voice Teachers are from Venus: The Top Ten Complaints from Both Sides of the Isle (or 'The Farmer and the Cowman Should Be Friends')." *Choral Journal* (April 2012), 51.

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## *Adjusting Between Choral and Solo Singing*

When singing in a choir, adjustments to resonance, dynamic, and vibrato rate and extent were common among the answers of participants in the 2010 document. Less common, although several participants mentioned slight changes, included adjustments to phonation and breath.

The singers' formant, commonly known as "ring," is an area of acoustic strength that allows for maximum vocal resonance. Richard Miller defines a formant as resulting "from the acoustic multiple of the fundamental pitch that originates at the level of the larynx, in response to shapes of the resonator tract, thereby producing regions of prominent acoustic energy distribution."<sup>3</sup> This was identified by several participants as an area of vocal production that should be adjusted in a choral setting.

Soloists train consistently to develop the formant so they can be heard over an orchestra. Some choral compositions, predominantly those written for chorus and orchestra, call for heightened resonance from the singers. The majority of participants, however, agree that resonance, particularly that of the singers' formant must be slightly decreased to avoid a singer cutting through the rest of the choral ensemble.

Scott McCoy, then Professor of Voice and Pedagogy at Westminster Choir College, served as a panelist at the fifty-first annual NATS national convention. On the topic of choral vs. solo singing he stated, "All of us have as our goal, enabling our singers to produce their best possible sounds. Right? Where we disagree is

<sup>3</sup> Richard Miller. *On the Art of Singing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 73.

what that best possible sound is."<sup>4</sup> As a teacher of singing, McCoy seeks to develop the students' individual vocal quality, "which enables them to stand out on the operatic stage or the concert stage and sing competitively and cooperatively with a symphony orchestra and a chorus and be heard."<sup>5</sup> He believes that choral conductors and voice teachers share much in common in the ways we approach teaching voice.

I think it is incumbent upon us as singing teachers to help our singers do everything that they need to do, and it means that the good ones—well, the more vocally developed ones—are going to really be able to use a different vocal technique when they're singing as soloists than when they're singing as choristers. And that's good. Now I say the more developed ones because we know that there is a point in somebody's vocal development when the best possible sound that they can make is appropriate equally as a soloist and as a chorister, but then there comes that point in many people's vocal development where the best solo sound is no longer appropriate in the choral situation, and they need to figure out how to take the "me" out of the sound sometimes. That's okay, and we need to help them do it. So I challenge you, help them.<sup>6</sup>

When pressed on the issue of what a large operatic voice is to do in a choral ensemble, McCoy made the following suggestion: "What we as opera singers do when we mark in rehearsal is really not all that different from what we might

<sup>4</sup> Scott McCoy. Solo/Choral Singing: A Symbiotic Relationship. Joint Session presented at the National Association of Teachers of Singing Fifty-First National Convention, Salt Lake City, UT. July 2-6.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

be called on to do when we need to contribute in a different manner in a choral situation. And I think that if we can give and help our students learn those skills it will apply in both directions.”<sup>7</sup>

Many participants identified vowel modification as an effective and healthy way to adjust resonance in a choral ensemble. Although soloists adjust vowels and airflow in order to maintain “ring,” those in an ensemble are asked to adjust vowels in order to maintain a unified sound. “Often, bright soloistic vowels will not blend and cannot be used in choral singing; but this is not in any way damaging to the solo instrument, it is simply the shape of the mouth which should be very flexible!”<sup>8</sup>

There was some disagreement regarding the adjustment of dynamic level when singing in a choir. A few participants believe there is no need to adjust one’s dynamic level from solo to choral singing. Instead, one should simply follow the dynamic markings in the score. Other participants find it appropriate to sing consistently one dynamic below the written marking in an ensemble. Those in favor of singing under the written marking seem less concerned with the choral sound and more concerned with vocal health and over use of one’s voice.

“Over-singing” was mentioned as potentially harmful to young singers in a choral ensemble. “Unfortunately, many young singers have yet to learn how to ‘feel’ the production of optimal tone rather than to ‘hear’ it...learning to manipulate or control the tone is a challenging, physical process and requires one to be completely aware of their vocal limitations. A good choral singer is one who clearly understands his/her voice

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Lesley Leighton, survey response to author, June 5, 2009.

and the extremes of its tonal spectrum.”<sup>9</sup> This understanding comes as a result of vocal training and experience.

Richard Miller writes, “*Messa di voce* is the ultimate exercise for ensuring skill in combining breath management and optimal phonation control.” Miller continues:

The *mesa di voce*—beginning the phrase at *p* or *pp* dynamic, *crescendoing* to a *f* or *ff*, returning to *p* or *pp*—is a test of how well breath emission and vocal-fold approximation are coordinated...If early depletion of the breath supply happens before completion of sustained phonation, or if vocal-fold closure becomes slack before the exact moment of release, the tone is breathy and loses vibrancy...*Messa di voce* study should be introduced only after security in breath management has been established... In practicing the *mesa de voce*, divide the process into (1) a *crescendo* from *p* to *f*, followed immediately by (2) an intervening silent breath renewal, and (3) a subsequent *decrescendo* from *f* to *p*. (Use a single pitch in lower-middle voice, later on higher pitches. Each of the cardinal vowels may be used alternately.)<sup>10</sup>

### *Vibrato*

Vibrato is frequently adjusted in the choral setting, which can heighten the contention within some music programs. Miller defines vibrato as “pitch variation, the result of neurological impulses that occur during proper coordination between airflow and vocal-fold

<sup>9</sup> Jay White, survey response to author, June 19, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Miller, 232-33.

approximation; a laryngeal relaxant principle characteristic of cultivated singing.”<sup>11</sup> Vibrato rate (number of modulations per second) and extant (amount of variations above and below the center frequency) greatly impact the aesthetic of sound. “Vibrato rates over 7 to 8 seconds are aesthetically displeasing to most people and sound ‘nervous’...vibrato [extant] greater than 2 semitones are usually aesthetically unacceptable and are typical of elderly singers in poor artistic vocal condition.”<sup>12</sup>

Most of the singers who participated in the 2010 essay have experience modifying their vibrato in choral ensembles and other performing environments. The majority, however, do not believe singers should completely remove vibrato when singing in a choir. Sataloff identified the complete removal of vibrato an impossible task: “even when people are singing ‘straight tone,’ instrumental analysis shows that vibrato is still present.”<sup>13</sup>

Several sopranos who took part in the document find it easier to modify vibrato in their lower register. “I modify my vibrato frequently in my choral singing...this is made easy for me due to the fact that I am singing in the alto range in choir...I could not modify my vibrato enough to be useful in many choral situations above the *secundo passagio* (for me an E flat and above).”<sup>14</sup>

Singers with a fast vibrato rate may be heard clearly through an ensemble and may indicate vocal problems. Discussions between voice

teachers and choral conductors should take place to determine proper voice placement for specific singers. Some sopranos will benefit vocally by singing second soprano or alto in college choirs, and perhaps in community and church ensembles as well.

Years of vocal training and a complete understanding of one’s vocal ability will allow for appropriate vibrato in a choral setting. Several participants believe that a vibrato-less tone is possible and safe, but that ability does not always come quickly or naturally. “Modifying vibrato somewhat is safe and possible, especially for highly skilled singers...In general, attempts to modify vibrato should be utilized only with the greatest caution...Attempts to modify it commonly involve increased tension which can potentially be harmful,”<sup>15</sup> Sataloff asserts.

In an article, “Vibrato, Science, and the Choral Singer,” published by the *Choral Journal*, Gayle Walker seeks to answer the following questions regarding vibrato in the choral ensemble:

- (1) Is there a desirable standard for vibrato in choral ensembles?
- (2) Can ensemble singers modify their vibrato?
- (3) What effect does straight tone singing have on the choral singer?
- (4) How can conductors accomplish vibrato adjustments in their ensembles?
- (5) With regard to blend, what are some alternatives to vibrato adjustment?<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 255.

<sup>12</sup> Brenda Smith and Robert T. Sataloff. *Choral Pedagogy* (San Diego: Plural Publishing Inc., 2006), 191.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Sataloff, survey response to author, August 26, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Tara Mianulli U’Ren, survey response to author, June 20, 2009.

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<sup>15</sup> Robert Sataloff, survey response to author, August 26, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Gayle Walker. “Vibrato, Science, and the Choral Singer,” *Choral Journal* 47:6 (December 2006), 42.

Walker views vibrato as a result of controlled breath release and freedom from unwanted vocal tension. Vibrato and a free vocal mechanism may also be closely associated with resonance. “Thus, singing with vibrato is not only a desirable standard for choirs, it may also be necessary for an energized, resonant choral sound.”<sup>17</sup>

In her discussion of vibrato modification, Walker found research that shows trained adults and college singers are able to modify components of their vibrato. “Therefore it appears reasonable for choral directors of singers at those levels to expect that their choirs can modify vibrato. Additionally, it is likely that these vocalists are capable of utilizing a flexible vibrato throughout a piece of music and for a variety of repertoire, during both rehearsals and performances.”<sup>18</sup> This research also shows that singers (soloist or ensemble singers) instinctively adjust vibrato according to genre, emotional expression, and dynamics.

In tackling the concept of non-vibrato singing, Walker found “evidence that continual straight tone singing could compromise developing solo technique and possibly fatigue the voice.”<sup>19</sup> She found, in two studies, that laryngeal tension and pressed phonation were associated with straight tone singing. She asserts, however, that professional singers make use of straight tone singing in a variety of genres without causing noticeable injury to their voices.

Vocal pedagogue Jean Westerman Gregg has suggested that professional singers of early music who utilize straight tone have learned to “use just enough excessive adductory force

to obtain an artistically produced straight tone...but without allowing the adduction to progress to the very tight pressed phonation.”<sup>20</sup>

Walker recognizes that professional singers have a refined technique that would allow for a healthy, unstrained, and resonant production of singing with minimal vibrato. The following suggestions listed by Walker may help conductors accomplish vibrato adjustments in their ensembles:

- Before explicitly asking for a reduction in vibrato, consider asking singers for a reduction in dynamics or an overall lightening of sound, being careful to remind them to maintain energized breath support and to keep the tone quality resonant.
- Instead of asking for a vibrato reduction, ask singers to listen carefully for a balance within their section and across the choir and to respond vocally to what they hear, again, reminding them to maintain proper breath support and resonance.
- When performing early repertoire, jazz, or other genres that require a decreased vibrato, educate students about the sound goal of that particular genre. Renaissance polyphony, for example, requires clarity of each voice part in order for the individual melodic lines to be heard. When singers understand this sound ideal, vibrato modification may automatically result.
- If it is necessary to directly ask singers to lessen vibrato, suggest that they “modify” their vibrato, rather than to sing non vibrato or straight tone.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

- Vary repertoire so that an entire rehearsal or performance does not require modified vibrato. As a result from good vocal technique, singers should be allowed opportunities to enjoy singing with their natural vibrato.
- Consider the application of straight tone carefully, especially in ensembles that include developing solo singers. Although professional soloists sometimes sing straight tone for expressive purposes without apparent vocal harm, studies seem to indicate that in less experienced singers straight tone can be difficult to achieve and that it might bring about a pressed phonation. If straight tone is musically required for expression, conductors might consider limiting it to short segments of music, rather than strictly applying it to an entire piece of music. Additionally, even for a brief segment of music, a request for straight tone should be accompanied by reminders to use adequate breath flow and support, maintain a resonant sound, and check for laryngeal tension.<sup>21</sup>

Rather than referencing vibrato in rehearsals, conductors may choose to ask singers to maintain awareness of balance, tuning, and vowel uniformity. Walker suggests arranging singers in a mixed ensemble formation as to allow for a more accurate and immediate assessment of their individual sound contribution in the ensemble. She concludes by stating choral directors need not only be responsible for shaping the sound and nuance of the choral ensemble, but need to remain conscientious of the vocal health and comfort of the individual singer.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 43.

### *Vocal Adjustments for Varying Stylistic Periods*

Professional singers will make certain vocal modifications related to performance practice. Some of these modifications, like those made to resonance and vibrato, relate to the adjustments one might make when singing in a choir. This, however, does not consider the singers' *fach* and the reality that many professional soloists are not trained to sing both Renaissance and Romantic literature. Hoch asserts, "Medieval and Renaissance solo literature exists, but is usually only performed by specialists."<sup>22</sup>

Richard Miller defines *fach* as "distinguishing one category of singing voice from another."<sup>23</sup> Although professional singers adjust technique when singing in different styles, there are few singers trained to be specialists in multiple areas. For this reason, several participants consider choral singing more demanding in terms of vocal adjustments.

### *Vocal Problems*

Vocal tension is an area of concern for singers who make certain adjustments to vibrato. White experienced added tension early in his career when singing without vibrato. Through practice and vocal maturation he has discovered ways to sing with less vibrato without creating tension.

There are singers who believe that choral conductors should not request a non-vibrato quality of sound. Bickel, for example, sees

<sup>22</sup> Matthew Hoch, survey response to author, June 22, 2009.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Miller. *Solutions for Singers*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 73.

potential harm when undergraduate students are asked to sing without vibrato, and believes that any request to make adjustments to vibrato should only occur after students have matured vocally.

I have not personally encountered vocal problems, but I have certainly had students who were in “vocal trouble” because a choral conductor asked them to “turn off the vibrato.” If we teach that vibrato is a natural occurrence when the voice is produced freely, then turning off that vibrato completely means the voice is not produced freely. This will get a singer into trouble - particularly at the undergraduate level. It is essential that singers learn how to control the flow of breath so that the larynx is free to vibrate, and yet not produce a vibrato that is either too fast, or too slow when singing for a choral conductor who wishes to have a “straight” tone, but this takes time, and undergraduate singers are frequently not capable of doing this until they are late juniors or even seniors.<sup>24</sup>

Fatigue is the most common vocal problem identified by singers in this survey. It seems, however, that excessive singing rather than vocal adjustments is the primary cause of fatigue. Singing softly in a high *tessitura* is another cause of vocal fatigue identified by multiple participants.

### *Ego*

Contention resulting from ego was mentioned by a few participants in this survey. Sataloff and Eustis both identify the need for a learning environment free from ego. “Essentially,

<sup>24</sup> Jan Bickel, survey response to author, July 6, 2009.

providing students with mastery of the craft of singing, the intelligence to understand the sound they are trying to produce before they try to produce it, and the discipline to make the music more important than their personal voice or ego, usually permit safe singing in any style or environment.”<sup>25</sup>

In her book *The Singer's Ego*, Eustis discusses the sometimes fragile relationship between singers and conductors. “The singer/conductor relationship must be ego-free. The two sides don't have to know each other intimately, but they must accept one another and agree (usually in an unspoken way) to put the music first because it is bigger than either one of them individually.”<sup>26</sup> Eustis identifies the singer's need for musical and emotional support from the conductor:

Conductors have a role similar to voice teachers in that they both balance the same two issues. The singer must know both that the conductor will have high standards and that he or she trusts in the singer's abilities. Singers are all too aware when a conductor has low expectations or lacks confidence in their talents. Nothing is worse for singers' mental and physical (i.e., vocal) state than feeling they must prove themselves to a conductor who has no faith in them. I find this to be equally true whether I am a soloist of a member of a large choir.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Robert Sataloff, survey response to author, August 26, 2009.

<sup>26</sup> Lynn Eustis, *The Singer's Ego Finding Balance Between Music and Life* (Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc., 2005), 153.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

## *Suggestions*

### *To Choral Conductors*

Terminology appears to be one area of conflict between choral and vocal faculty, specifically terminology identified by vocal faculty as detrimental to vocal progress and health. “Straight-tone” and “blend” are two terms to avoid with singers.

Choral singing is often unified and sung at the center of the pitch, but asking singers to “blend” may not achieve one’s desired sound; there are many components that go into a “blended” sound. Much of the frustration from professional singers and teachers of singers seems to arise from loss of “vocal identity” in a choral ensemble; specifically, a trained singer trying to match the sound of an untrained singer. There are many other effective methods in achieving a unified sound. Some of these methods include addressing vowel shape (bright, forward, back, dark), intonation, pitch/rhythmic accuracy, seating formation, voice placement, dynamic, tempo, balance, vibrato, vocal technique, and the conductor’s gesture.

Avoid using the term “straight-tone” in the choral rehearsal. This term may cause unwanted manipulations and tension in the young untrained voice. Gresham asserts, “I have noticed in several young singers that the combination of reduction of amplitude and removal of vibrato just means less airflow and tightly adducted folds. I think this is where the real controversy comes in—young singers making inappropriate vocal manipulations to try to come to the sound that a director is requesting.”<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> David Gresham, survey response to author, July 6, 2009.

Conductors should remain mindful of vocal fatigue and the overuse of students’ instruments. Teach students and allow them to mark down an octave when repeating high *tessitura* passages. Sullivan tells of an experience she once had when singing with Robert Shaw:

If there are high parts that you need to drill to get them right, please drill them an octave low and quietly several times before asking the singers to do the phrase at pitch. Robert Shaw used to run all rehearsals up until the dress rehearsal with certain rules: any note above a D was to be sung an octave low, and dynamics, though proportional, should not exceed mezzo-piano. Wow. That summer I did in France with him, we sang three hours in the morning and then three more hours after lunch, and I never got tired. It was awesome.<sup>29</sup>

There are choral conductors who try to remain constantly aware of students’ vocal health and singing engagements outside of the choral rehearsal. Brady R. Allred, former Director of Choral Studies at the University of Utah, added the following statement to his syllabus:

It is incumbent upon you to use wisdom in the way you care for your instrument (your voice). If you are vocally tired or ill, please do not sing in rehearsal. If you have a performance, recital, or even a voice lesson that day and need to save your voice, please mark in rehearsal or don’t sing at all. I am understanding of your decision not to sing as long as you tell me before rehearsal begins.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Martha Sullivan, survey response to author, June 16, 2009.

<sup>30</sup> Brady Allred. 2010. Solo/Choral Singing: A Symbiotic Relationship. Joint Session presented at the National Association of Teachers of Singing Fifty-First National Convention, Salt Lake City, UT. July 2-6.



This statement is helpful in empowering students to be mindful of their instrument. It will help prevent vocal fatigue and may prove effective in building collegiality between voice teachers and choral conductors.

Continued studies in vocal pedagogy are extremely important for the choral conductor, especially if the conductor's training is in keyboard rather than voice. There are some participants in the survey who find frustration with choral conductors who have little knowledge of vocal pedagogy. This knowledge may help alleviate conflict as choral conductors and voice teachers try to develop a common vocabulary; however, a shared vocabulary will not remove conflict completely as voice teachers and choral conductors seek a different aesthetic. Martha Randall, Professor of Voice and Pedagogy at the University of Maryland, spoke to this conflict at the NATS convention:

Conductors are now taking voice lessons, and at the University of Maryland choral conductors take pedagogy. But as Tim [Sharp] mentioned in a conversation a few days ago, this hasn't eliminated the problems of conflicting instruction being given to the student by the choral conductor and the voice teacher. We voice teachers don't always agree pedagogically or even have the same aesthetic. So it's no surprise we take exception to technical instruction given by a voice teacher in a choral setting. So how do we communicate with each other for the good of the singers?...Children become bilingual easily. Singers can develop skills that satisfy the needs for both solo and choral singing in most cases. We need to be clear in our own definitions, especially until we develop a common language.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Martha Randall. 2010. Solo/Choral Singing: A Symbiotic

Although voice teachers and choral conductors may seek a different aesthetic, it is important that choral conductors maintain a wealth of knowledge on vocal technique and training since the majority of their students are not studying voice privately. Gresham recalls a statement from his former choral conductor. "I have always been motivated by something that Larry Kaptein [former choral conductor at the University of Colorado at Boulder] said in a lesson with me: 'I always want students to leave my rehearsal feeling like they are better singers than when they came in.'"<sup>32</sup>

### *To Voice Teachers*

The variety and amount of repertoire to which students are exposed through their collegiate ensemble experience should nourish a professional career as a choral singer and soloist. Many undergraduate, graduate, and professional vocalists maintain paid positions in choral ensembles. "Beyond the university level, the vast majority of voice students will not go on to become professional opera singers; however, they may become enthusiastic members of a professional, community, or church choir."<sup>33</sup> Those who do become professional soloists will have better sight reading facilities as a result of their choral experience.

Help your students become stronger and more thoughtful choral singers. Brenda Smith suggests being present at rehearsals and concerts. In her

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<sup>32</sup> David Gresham, survey response to author, July 6, 2009.

<sup>33</sup> Virginia Sublett. "Vibrato or Nonvibrato in Solo and Choral Singing: Is There Room for Both" *Journal of Singing*, Vol. 65 (May/June 2009), 541.

statement at the NATS Convention she presents the following ideas:

We need to go forward and take a look at the seats where our students are sitting for hours at a time in rehearsal, and teach our students in their lessons where their feet should be... Choral conductors don't think about the need to say "would you all please sit with your feet in front you and your weight balanced on the balls of those feet." They don't always think about saying, "When you are not singing why don't you relax in your seat" and... "why don't you come back to a singers' posture." Some conductors do, some don't think of it because they're thinking of much bigger issues.<sup>34</sup>

Other challenges arise when choral conductors find it inappropriate to correct individual students in the choir. It is helpful to maintain a learning environment where fixing individual vowels, colors, and intonation are acceptable. When this practice is not followed, students may unknowingly be over-correcting for the entire section and possibly creating unhealthy vocal tension or fatigue. Smith asserts, "If the music is being repeated because someone down the row from you [made an error], then you don't need to be singing as much right then."<sup>35</sup>

Smith mentions the need to teach a lighter style of healthy singing. "Not many of us think to teach our singers how to mark or sing lightly in choir. Very often we say, 'try not to sing or look like you're singing when you're not, and actually, what we're creating is a situation where they're afraid they're going to get caught. So

<sup>34</sup> Brenda Smith. 2010. Solo/Choral Singing: A Symbiotic Relationship. Joint Session presented at the National Association of Teachers of Singing Fifty-First National Convention, Salt Lake City, UT. July 2-6.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

their tummy is tight, and when the time comes to breathe, they really can't."<sup>36</sup>

### *To Choral Conductors and Voice Teachers*

According to those surveyed in this project and the panel of members at the NATS convention, collaboration is the most effective method in alleviating any tension that might arise as a result of differing opinions. Tim Sharp, Executive Director of ACDA (American Choral Directors Association), mentioned the need to address "tension" when collaborating with colleagues. "Collaboration is not the absence of tension, but it's the fruitful cultivation of tension."<sup>37</sup> Sharp suggests the faster we address and accept tension the faster solutions will emerge. He referred to a statement by Martha Randall as a catalyst for getting the conversation started. "It is incumbent upon us to communicate with each other, even if we must begin by talking about anything in order to talk about something."<sup>38</sup>

Allred suggests that it is sometimes the student who puts faculty at odds with one another. "Problems like that are solved when faculty communicate with each other. We should assume the best of each other and not jump to conclusions."<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Tim Sharp. 2010. Solo/Choral Singing: A Symbiotic Relationship. Joint Session presented at the National Association of Teachers of Singing Fifty-First National Convention, Salt Lake City, UT. July 2-6.

<sup>38</sup> Martha Randall. 2010. Solo/Choral Singing: A Symbiotic Relationship. Joint Session presented at the National Association of Teachers of Singing Fifty-First National Convention, Salt Lake City, UT. July 2-6.

<sup>39</sup> Brady Allred. 2010. Solo/Choral Singing: A Symbiotic Relationship. Joint Session presented at the National Association of Teachers of Singing Fifty-First National Convention, Salt Lake City, UT. July 2-6.

Finding a shared vocabulary between choral and vocal colleagues may be one method of alleviating such tension. “Come up with consistent language to describe vocal techniques and tone colors, so students hear the same thing in rehearsal and the voice studio.”<sup>40</sup>

There are some who believe choral singing will slow progress made in the private studio. Choral conductors and voice teachers might collaborate to help students best manage their time in the choral rehearsal and the practice room. Engaging in a respectful conversation with one another about how students should best budget their vocal stamina will benefit all parties involved.

Conversations like this are becoming more common among choral conductors and voice teachers. Sharon Hansen, Professor and Director of Choral Activities at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, closed the NATS Joint Session with a statement of hope that more collaboration is taking place. She sought the number of articles published in the *Journal of Singing* containing the word “choral” or “choir:”

There were thirteen articles printed in the early days of the *Journal of Singing* from 1948-1959...There was one article printed in the 1960s. There was one article printed in the 1970s. There was one article printed in the 1980s. There were no articles printed in the 1990s. And then there were six articles printed from 2000 until now. So much like ACDA, there was discussion and dialogue about choral and solo singing in the early years of NATS. Again paralleling ACDA that discussion then dies away in the last quarter of the 20th century. As ACDA enters its sixth decade the interest in and passion

<sup>40</sup> Jo Anne Taylor, survey response to author, June 30, 2008.

about voice is growing. Choral conductors and voice teachers are discovering more and more that dialogue about good and healthy singing can be both, good and healthy.<sup>41</sup>

Looking beyond this article, one might seek more specific pedagogical methods of navigating between choral and solo singing. Collaboration with vocal/choral colleagues, further studies in vocal pedagogy, and constant monitoring of students’ individual vocal progress will allow for an understanding of healthy techniques in the choral classroom.

In our field we find that some choral conductors are ill equipped in an appropriate understanding of healthy singing. We also see intolerance towards choral singing by some voice teachers. Both challenges are in direct conflict with the education and growth of our students. Recent articles published on the differences between choral and solo singing and a growing partnership between ACDA and NATS show a trend towards mitigating the divide. Continued collaboration and communication between choral conductors and voice teachers provides our greatest opportunity to best serve our students.



<sup>41</sup> Sharon Hansen. 2010. Solo/Choral Singing: A Symbiotic Relationship. Joint Session presented at the National Association of Teachers of Singing Fifty-First National Convention, Salt Lake City, UT. July 2-6.

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