

Female vocal identity: A phenomenology

By Bridget Sweet and Elizabeth Cassidy Parker

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Topic

The authors of this study explored how female vocalists developed their vocal identities and how those experiences shaped their later work as musicians. For the participants in this study, other people held enormous influence over their developing identities as vocalists.

Findings

Positive interactions with significant others such as friends, family members, and teachers contributed to positive feelings about singing in general and their personal voices in particular. Some participants felt like they couldn't always please both their choral instructor and their private voice instructor, and that led to some confusion in their vocal identity development. Voice classifications, especially early in vocal development, also influenced their vocal identity development. Sometimes early vocal classification was at odds with self-perceptions or with later voice classifications, which caused internal conflict for the participants. Participants also experienced heightened periods of negative emotions, particularly when preparing for performances or trying to please others. Sometimes they wouldn't talk about issues or discomfort they were experiencing, which led to further issues. Similarly, participants felt a lack of agency within the traditional conductor-centered model of education which hindered their vocal identity development.

Implications

- Provide encouragement for young singers, especially as they begin to go through the voice change. Remember that singers who are assigned female at birth go through a voice change as well, and they often need encouragement during that time period just like students who were assigned male at birth.
- Avoid using voice classifications too early. Allow singers to switch regularly between voice parts and to build their full range.
- Discuss vocal pedagogy in the choir classroom. Help students understand how to create a healthy, free tone in a variety of styles.
- Create an open space for students to talk about issues they are experiencing with their voice. Check in proactively with singers on a regular basis. Share your own struggles with your vocal identity development so they know the thoughts and struggles they have are normal.
- Find ways to build in more student ownership and autonomy in the choral classroom. Allow students to work in small groups through sectionals or Jigsaw learning, give

students opportunities to help select repertoire, or guide students in a composition project.

Additional Resources

For ideas on how to build in more autonomy in your classroom, check out “Never Work Harder Than Your Students” by Robyn Jackson.

For more on teaching developing singers, check out “Growing Musicians” by Bridget Sweet.

Kari Adams, Florida State University

The process of social identity development in adolescent high school choral singers: A grounded theory.

By Elizabeth Cassidy Parker

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Topic

The authors of this study interviewed thirty-six high school choral singers from three mid-sized midwestern high schools about their experience of social identity development in choir. The researchers discovered that participants were influenced greatly by social cliques and egos from their classmates, as well as parents, school and community members, and their choir teacher.

Findings

Data revealed an eight-stage process of social identity development. The process began with the student’s initial decision to audition and remain in choir, which then progressed through experiences that happened in the choir, singing with others, various accomplishments, pride, and ended with the last category of a desire to give back to the community. Students were influenced to join by a variety of people, including teachers, family members, and friends. Participants felt a great deal of pride for being chosen to be in the “in-group” of the mixed ensemble, and a sense of comradery with people in the ensemble who could understand the struggles that come with choir that non-music friends did not quite understand. Participants all felt a great deal of accountability within their group through the risks they had to take to support the group and remain present even in scenarios that seem unconventional in learning. Participants also voiced that it was sometimes difficult to accept criticism and not take it personally. All of these practices—accountability, risk taking, leadership—were taught by veteran members through the new members looking up to and mirroring their behaviors. Participants identified a great influence from friends in the group, but the presence of social cliques and some large egos caused struggle within the ensemble experience at times. Each

participant also discussed the “central phenomenon” of team at one point, relating it to a “family” through the shared experiences of singing together. The voice sections functioned as teams within the larger team, and many felt they found their place in choir through these teams. Participants indicated that through their experiences in the ensemble, they were able to discover who they were as people and even what they want to pursue as future careers. The participants had a great deal of love for their program and had a strong desire to give back to the choir community.

Implications

- As directors of these ensembles, it is important to create an environment that can foster and nurture relationships—it cannot happen without the director.
- Adolescents are building considerable peer groups and expanding their ideas of who they are as social people within the school environment. Teachers should be aware of the importance of these social aspects of students’ lives.
- Build upon these peer groups by creating smaller singing groups to heighten participant belonging, use a retreat to fortify the choir team, and acknowledge that intense rehearsal periods may have a positive social impact.
- Music education policy makers and practitioners should consider the importance of social development in their advocacy plans at local, regional, and national levels.

Additional Resources

For more information on cultivating a strong group dynamic, check out “The Culture Code” and “The Culture Playbook” by Daniel Coyle.

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An examination of critical thinking skills in high school choral rehearsals

By Marques L. Garrett

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Topic

The author of this study examined the relationship between the time high school choirs spent in nonperformance and critical thinking activities. As music educators place a high value on developing students’ critical thinking, this study examined the correlation between nonperformance time in rehearsal and how much of that time was spent on critical thinking activities.

Findings

The author found that time spent in performance and nonperformance activities were very similar. Teacher talk accounted for the majority of nonperformance interactions between students and teachers, and lower-order thinking accounted for over forty percent of nonperformance rehearsal time. When comparing beginning choirs to advanced ones, the beginning choirs spent more time on lower-order thinking than their advanced counterparts from the same school. A moderate positive correlation existed between time spent in nonperformance activities and time spent using critical thinking skills.

Implications

- This study shows that teachers spend little time in rehearsals that use or develop critical thinking. Increasing critical thinking time could be a focus for teachers as we refine our art of teaching.
- Participant teachers use similar approaches with all of their ensembles, regardless of the level of the choir. Perhaps choral directors could examine varying their techniques for the needs of each ensemble.
- Dialogue between teacher and students should include more reflective questioning, and rehearsals should be structured to incorporate more self-evaluation by students.
- Preservice and in-service teachers need more training with specific strategies to develop and foster critical thinking skills in their students.

Additional Resources

NAfME's "2014 Music Standards" can serve as a starting point for incorporating critical thinking skills.

State MEAs have increased offerings related to critical thinking in the music classroom. Look for and attend these sessions at your next state conference.

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Pitch systems and Curwen hand signs: A review of literature

By Marta Frey-Clark

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Topic

The author of this study explored prior literature on the use of different pitch systems and Curwen hand signs when learning to sing from notation. The intent of the article was to equip music educators with information on the rationales, classroom use and effectiveness of these strategies.

Findings

Mnemonic aids such as pitch syllable systems and Curwen hand signs have been used for centuries to enforce tonal memory and improve music literacy skills among choral musicians. There are two types of pitch systems: movable and fixed. Fixed systems allow for easy transfer to instrumental training, are more suitable for use in atonal passages, and can be used as a vocal placement mnemonic as well. Moveable systems allow for directing the ear towards tonal function, are more suitable for modulations, and can be used in any key. The majority of classroom teachers use movable systems, particularly movable “do” and scale degree numbers. Studies have shown that novice students sight sing more accurately using moveable *do* than neutral syllables. Investigations on the effectiveness of moveable *do* vs. fixed *do* have been inconclusive. Curwen hand signs also function as a tonal mnemonic device to reinforce moveable *do* and are often incorporated in the Kodály approach. They can be beneficial for visual and kinesthetic learners. They can also represent the character of each scale degree, such as *ti* pointing up to *do*. One negative effect is that they can add a layer of complexity to music reading that could limit some musicians. Use of hand signs in the classroom varies by state. Research has not linked any significant sight singing gains to the use of these hand signs. However, they can offer pragmatic benefits to educators, allowing for communication without singing.

Implications

- There is no single most effective pitch system, but choosing the system that is most common in the U.S. (scale degrees or moveable *do*) may benefit your students.
- If possible, introduce a pitch system as early as possible and stick with the same one. It may be beneficial for elementary and secondary educators to coordinate through their feeder chain and agree on one system. This will allow that system to serve the student throughout their musical life/education and benefit them most.
- If using a moveable *do* system, make sure that your students understand the function of these syllables to help them transfer learned pitch patterns into other songs.

- The use of hand signs is up to what the educator sees as best for their students. Be sure to monitor the effectiveness of hand signs in your classroom and adjust as needed to aid in the music reading process.

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