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Vocal Health Issues Pertaining to High School Choral Conductors

by Brandon Hollihan

Introduction

[1] As a choral conductor, I have had to learn how to balance personal vocal development with activities as a choral singer and conductor. The vocal requirements of a choral conductor, which may involve spoken instructions as well as vocal modeling, can be as physically demanding as singing. My early experiences with vocal modeling were frustrating and tiresome because I did not understand the proper way to execute correct vocal modeling. In a conducting lesson, Hilary Apfelstadt¹ suggested limiting the amount of speaking and modeling I employed while at the podium to avoid becoming vocally fatigued.

[2] Having become aware of the potential of vocal health issues in choral conductors, I decided to begin observing high school choral educators for the purpose of discovering practices that might lead to vocal health problems. Nearly half of the conductors surveyed direct five or more choirs and most rehearse up to four hours a day, finding little time for rest. As such, I became interested in ways these teachers handle vocal stress and fatigue. In this study, I surveyed forty-six high school choral conductors throughout Ohio regarding various aspects of their teaching.

Problem #1: Inadequate Hydration

[3] One potential problem is inadequate hydration; therefore, one of the questions I asked regarded daily water consumption. The recommended amount of water intake for an adult is sixty-four ounces per day.² Five respondents said that they consume less than

¹ Hilary Apfelstadt is Director of Choral Activities at The Ohio State University School of Music and national President of the American Choral Directors Association.

² Food & Nutrition Board of the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies of Science. "Dietary Reference Intakes for Electrolytes and Water." 2004.

twenty ounces per day, while another five said that they consume between twenty and forty. Only three respondents said that they consume more than forty ounces of water per day. A lack of adequate water consumption is dangerous for choral conductors because it exposes their vocal folds to dehydration. When someone speaks or sings, the folds, housed in the larynx, rub against each other at a high rate, producing sound. This action causes friction that may lead to swelling, resulting in hoarseness in cases of inadequate hydration.³

Problem #2: Challenging Acoustical Environments

[4] All of the respondents to the survey said that they experienced vocal fatigue after a typical day of rehearsal. One way to reduce the onset of vocal fatigue is to amplify the voice of the conductor in situations wherein they might not otherwise be easily heard. One high school conductor surveyed mentioned using a microphone in rehearsal because of the large size of his ensembles. Another solution might be to alter the rehearsal space so as to improve acoustical qualities. For example, placing the risers against a wall can create an acoustical shell that allows the conductor's directions to more easily resonate in the space.⁴

Problem #3: Misuse of Vocal Modeling

[5] I became aware of another potential problem related to vocal health while observing a teacher in central Ohio who models frequently in rehearsal. This can be problematic for two reasons:

1. When a conductor transitions from speaking-voice to singing-voice the resulting "shifting of gears" can be damaging if the conductor does not speak and/or sing correctly.
2. In order to be heard, the conductor might try singing louder than the choir. This may put unwanted pressure on the vocal folds, potentially wearing out the voice at a fast rate.

[6] High amounts of vocal modeling may also affect a choir's vocal qualities, encouraging them to mirror the conductor's demonstrations rather than producing their

³ Robert L. Garretson, *Conducting Choral Music*, 7th ed., (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1993).

⁴ Mary J. Sandage, "Vocal Health for the Music Teacher," *Choral Journal* 42 (2001): 57-59.

own, distinctive sound. After listening to student singers at Baylor University, Robin Rice⁵ noted:

[7] Singers from two studios all had similar timbres and mannerisms. I wondered how that was [possible] until I noticed that the teachers sang as much if not more in the lessons than the student did. So, the student begins to inherit the same vocal qualities as the teacher. This could have some nice returns, but overall it seems to be detrimental, especially when you take into account the age and or gender difference between the teacher and student.

[8] Doscher⁶ was avidly against it. A male voice modeling in falsetto for a female tends to make the females think that the teacher then wants a straighter, heavier tone. [The] same goes for a tenor with a bass or baritone modeler. I had problems of my own because I had females for teachers and they tend to like brighter sounds and males tend to sing with higher laryngeal positions.

[9] Vocal modeling as the principal or sole element of teaching may take away from the students' learning process. One way of avoiding unnecessary vocal modeling might be to isolate voice parts that have trouble with a particular phrase, and rehearse that part in extraction.

Concluding Remarks

[10] I believe that high school choral conductors are vitally important to the development of young singers across the country. This training is essential to the preservation and continuation of the choral singing tradition. In this regard, choral conductors must do their part in caring for their own voices, so as to best serve the ensembles for which they are responsible.

⁵ Robin Rice is an associate professor of voice at The Ohio State University School of Music.

⁶ Barbara Doscher is the author of *The Functional Unity of the Singing Voice*.

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