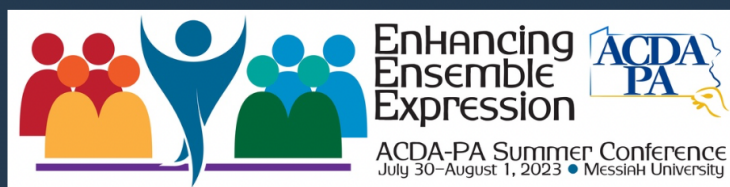




# BLEND, BALANCE, AND BUZZ!

UNIQUE AND EFFECTIVE VOCAL PEDAGOGY FOR CHOIRS



30th  
July



10:00AM

MESSIAH UNIVERSITY

CLINICIAN:

JON M. TIMMONS



# The Three 'R's

## *Rapport, Repertoire, Reflection*

### **Rapport**

The relationship between the choral director and singer(s) is paramount to building a successful and meaningful program. It does not happen overnight and takes great care and effort to maintain. Educators must know their students and be able to, at any moment, "take the temperature" of the ensemble and pivot as needed. Only when there is mutual respect musically and personally, will an ensemble reach greater heights. To me, this is the foundation of building an ensemble and program that will last, grow, and thrive. Singers must trust and respect the educator in front of them, and, the educator must take great initiative to maintain healthy and appropriate connections with their singers

### **Repertoire**

A director's choice in repertoire can literally make or break an ensemble's experience and/or sound. It may seem obvious, but being very deliberate in repertoire selection is essential for advancing your students' skills and needs. And as many know, every year looks different. Each year, a different combination of students is set before us and the repertoire must be a vehicle for success. We all strive for excellent programming, but only choosing a piece based on a certain time of year, composer, background, or other niche reason does not automatically make it appropriate for your choir. You must know what your singers can handle, how they can be pushed, and what they can technically and emotionally handle. Again, knowing your singers is key. This can be challenging for larger groups - don't be afraid to abandon a piece that isn't working for any given reason. Students tend to be rather transparent about their likes/dislikes. My advice is to program for your students' needs - not for an outside agenda that isn't promoting healthy, meaningful singing.

### **Reflection**

As educators, we must continually be reflecting on our teaching practices. We all know the intensities that come with our musical highs and lows, but it's important to know the **why**. Why did a piece or concert go so well? Why didn't it? What techniques are working and which are not? **WHY?** The longer you work with singers the easier it becomes to know what works and what doesn't, but again, students change! We must continuously reflect on what practices are effective. It's also paramount to stay up-to-date with current vocal trends and to adjust our perceptions.

## **The Choir Director - A Voice Teacher For All**

Our students come to us with an incredibly diverse range of aptitudes and abilities. We are always trying to navigate the complexities of teaching many students the same concept. It's even harder to do this with the voice. For many of our students, we will be the only "voice teacher" they ever have. I hesitate to put voice teacher in quotation marks as I do believe this is part of our job! No, it does not replace the one-on-one attention of a private instructor. That said, we must be dedicated to helping our students find their voice and feel as confident as possible. This may be a bit controversial, but I find that many undergraduate music education majors do not receive sufficient vocal pedagogy education. It is often a fleeting topic and more attention is given to performance majors. Yes, we are taught choral methods, but those courses often don't address common issues with young voices. The more one understands the voice pedagogically, the better equipped they will be at addressing vocal issues within ensembles.

It should be noted that the socio-economic make-up of our schools and districts can play a big part in our students' access to private instructors. Depending on where you teach, some students may have all the resources in the world for exceptional private instruction, while others will only have your guidance. It's an unfair yet honest reality. We must take great care with our students' vocal health and progression!

## **Young Voices**

Young voices are so complex and ever changing. That said, they have a lot of versatility and resilience! We may become scared or intimidated about what section to place our singers in. Some students are incredibly obvious. You may have that super soprano who can pop out high B flats with ease, while others have an octave range that's shaky. That's okay! Use trial and error and circle back with the student to see how they're feeling about the voice part they're singing. Also, pairing a shaky singer with a confident singer is a tried and true technique. I will get to more specifics about each voice type, but in my experience, many young sop/alto singers can truly sing either alto or soprano depending on the piece - this excludes extremes in the tessitura. Tenors and basses are a bit more tricky and as we all know, they are often the toughest to help and retain. More on them later! Keep in mind that our students are hearing all kinds of vocal styles - usually not choral or "classical" - it's our job to demonstrate and provide plenty of healthy listening opportunities for them. Latin and other foreign language/diverse pieces won't just happen without consistent reinforcement of the vocal tone needed for said repertoire.

## Techniques!

### Unison warm-ups:

I am a huge proponent of unison singing at any vocal level. The more your ensemble sings together, either the exact same pitches or in octaves, the more and more they are forced to balance and blend their tone. When everyone is on the same pitch, it quickly shows where there are issues. It's also great for vowel work. Don't be afraid to have tenors/basses sing in their falsetto and for sopranos/altos to use a low chest voice - more on this later.

### Lip Buzzing:

I realize that this is not particularly unique, however I swear by this technique. Breath management is the singular issue that most singers struggle with - and when addressed properly - alleviates many other vocal faults.

Lip buzzing frees the larynx of tension and allows air to pass through the vocal cords with minimal tension. Additionally, it really forces the singers to manage their air. It takes a lot of air to keep a lip buzz going and if your singers are struggling to buzz, they either aren't taking in enough air or they are not managing their air well.

When we breathe for singing, the diaphragm descends - allowing room for the lungs to expand. The reason our stomachs puff out with a low breath is because the diaphragm is literally pushing down on our lower organs. They get displaced as the diaphragm descends - the goal is to manage the speed at which the diaphragm ascends. We don't have direct control of our diaphragm. This is a technique that takes A LOT of time to master. I have found that the lip buzz encourages both a relaxed larynx and forces singers to use the appropriate muscles to manage air loss as they sing. The intercostal muscles around the ribs work to keep the rib cage expanded during exhalation and the abdominal muscles contract and retract - this is where the "tension" for breath management should be felt.

I do NOT encourage my singers to suck in their stomachs while singing. The feeling of an expanded low breath should be maintained while singing - sucking in or bouncing the stomach adds unnecessary tension and forces the diaphragm up prematurely. Yes, the stomach does retract as we lose air, but we counter that feeling by staying expanded for as long as possible. It's essentially the appoggio style of breathing.

The lip buzz should be even - not sputtering. It should not speed up or slow down. If this happens, the air stream is not even. Encouraging a smooth and even buzz will

automatically promote connected singing. Students often punch notes with air instead of singing **through** phrases. Have your singer lip buzz through phrases making sure their lip buzz is even and consistent. If it's not, they are not managing their air properly.

Not all students will be able to lip buzz at first. It takes coordination between the corners of the mouth and a loose jaw. The teeth should NOT be touching or clenched. If the teeth are clenched, it adds tension that is counterproductive and also does not promote expanded exhalation. Keep encouraging your singers to practice. Almost every student I've had that couldn't buzz at first eventually gets it. I use this technique in every rehearsal.

### **Vocal Slides:**

One of the best ways to help singers connect between register shifts in the voice is slides. Many young singers sing note to note in a very disjointed way instead of singing through notes - essentially, phrasing! Large interval jumps can be scary and vocal quality is lost when connection between registers isn't fluid. The vocal folds operate differently depending on where a singer is in their range. By sliding between and through register shifts, singers can feel their break and better manage the vocal adjustment.

For sopranos and altos I like to do two octave slides starting at F3 and slide up to F5 and back down to F3, going up by half-steps. I go as high as my highest soprano can go. I always tell my singers to drop out if the range is too high (or low). This can be done with a lip buzz or any vowel. The vowel will need to be modified, especially above the staff. For tenors and basses, I prefer slides of 1-5 (Do-Sol). This smaller interval is more attainable and often has more success. The range of young tenors and basses tends to be more limited - this exercise helps them over their break and can really help those basses that sing an octave below what's written in their music. I often start at G2 and work my way up. It may be too low for many, but it's a good starting point for basses whose voices have dropped low. I highly recommend doing the above exercises with a lip buzz and transitioning to vowels.

### **Belting/Chest Voice:**

This aspect of the voice has always been controversial and "scary" - especially for those of us who were brought up in the classical tradition where musical theatre and pop music was seen as a novelty not fit for the "serious" stage. Well hogwash! There is room for all genres and vocal techniques. What's key is knowing how and when to use it. That said, I do feel that the most modern musical theatre repertoire really pushes the boundaries of healthy vocal belting. Particularly for young voices. Great care should be taken with students participating in musical theatre.

All of this said, the belt/chest voice is powerful and impressive when executed correctly. Air must be the power source for the belt - the vocal folds are in full use and without the correct support, the voice will fatigue and give out. Students should explore all parts of their range and vocal color. Naturally, some students may find the belt easier than others. Some may find a mixed voice (optimal for young voices). I think of a singer like Sutton Foster who is well into her 40s and still can sing difficult repertoire. It's crucial to identify the vocal register breaks and learn how to shift in and out of the chest/head voice. Vocal slides and very supported shouts and sirens can help with this.

Vowel, resonance, and articulator adjustments are also crucial. I call it the 'Apple Bite' technique. Imagine you're about to take a huge bite out of an apple. The top teeth are exposed, cheeks are raised, there's an inner smile that lifts the soft palate, and there's a lift in the eye brows. These adjustments help to create the necessary space for the sound to resonate and project ONLY IF air is supporting the sound. Watch any singer belting into their high register - they are apple biting! Encourage students to explore this. Don't shy away from chest voice - you'll know and hear if it's pressed and fatigued.

### **Falsetto/Head Voice:**

The use of head voice is much less controversial than chest voice though I would argue that it is not used enough in the developing and dropped tenor/bass voice. Falsetto and head voice uses the vocal folds in a different way. It is typically much more versatile in soprano/alto voices (less countertenors, etc.). Often, tenor and bass voices shy away from falsetto once the voice changes because of societal stigma and the color of the sound. But the truth is, a strong tenor/bass falsetto strengthens the voice and increases range. It helps in switching between registers and strengthening a mixed voice. Falsetto voice should be explored often to keep the vocal range versatile. I've found many tenors/basses can achieve an impressive Bflat5/C6 - if not higher. More and more modern and pop music has singers flipping into this range. Explore it.

For sopranos and alto the break into head voice is the most problematic. What I've found is a strong chest voice that begins to give out around G4 to B4. This middle register can often sound breathy and anemic. It's a struggle with young voices and should be addressed continuously. I always make sure that warm-ups include going through this precarious area in the voice. Negotiating between a belt/mixed/head voice is tough, but over time, the singer will know what their voice can do and begin to trust it. I deliberately tell my singers to stay in one voice or when to shift to another. This where vocal slides really help - sliding between registers is much gentler and the singer can often feel the difference more clearly. I have also found that F5 for the soprano/alto voice is a major shift in vocal timbre. I always make sure

to get my singers in this range. I ask them to use the ease of voice above F5 in their lower range. If the lower registers carry too much weight when the head voice is needed, the color of the head voice will suffer. The goal is for the entire instrument from low to high to be clean, consistent, resonant, and healthy.

### **Extremes! Nasal/Pharyngeal Sounds:**

I really swear by these techniques. As with anything in life, we often don't truly know what something is until we know what it's not - hot, cold, love, pain, etc.. Think of that first time you experienced a burn from a hot stove or pot. You immediately realized the pain and danger of heat - the same could be said of sticking your bare hand into a mound of snow or ice water. These extremes teach us lessons and help us find balance. The same is true for singing.

I am not suggesting we push our voices to unhealthy levels, but for younger and new singers, they often need to feel the extremes of vocal technique to find a healthy balance. Playing with vocal extremes is not only a bit silly and fun, it really helps singers to find the sound they actually want to achieve.

One of the most effective tools is using an extremely nasal, forward, and pressed sound. What's unique about this technique is that it almost mimics overtone singing. When done correctly, chords tune, and overtones are heard. Is the vocal quality what we often want, no - but that is the point. In general, we do want a more forward, colorful vocal timbre. I find this especially true for "wolfy" basses or other voices that swallow (cover) their tone. This often happens when young voices try to imitate older, more mature voices.

You can use nonsensical words such as "blah blah" or "yah yah" to sing through passages that aren't locking or where vocal color is lacking. Taking away text and "proper" tone also allows the singer to loosen up and experience their voice in a different and less intimidating way. Singing in this intense, nasal way helps singers find the integrity of their sound and tuning. When this technique is used, it helps the singers understand the vocal "placement" (I don't love that term) is essential and it can be adjusted depending on the vocal color desired.

This same technique can be used for glottal or aspirate vocal attacks, exploring extremes in the vocal range, and really allowing the voice to speak. I really like using this technique with brand new singers who are afraid to be loud or mess up - make noise!! Be bold and big - once one hears the power of the voice, only then can they begin to navigate and optimize its potential.

### **Vocal Genres - Break the Barriers!**

This is perhaps one of the sillier techniques that I use, but I still find it incredibly effective. Take a song that's giving your ensemble trouble and turn it upside down. Take the seriousness and pressure away. Allow your singers to sing as they would a solo or to sing it like their favorite artist. They can take liberties with rhythm, add riffs, and completely ignore the other singers in the choir. They take their part and just sing. One, it's fun to see what some students come up with, and two, it allows each singer to find their own way and voice.

Some may sing like a pop star, some like a musical theatre kid, others may go for a super classical tone. There are no limits other than keeping the tempo set. This is especially helpful when your singers get "afraid" of a piece and the tone and technique is shallow and timid. They're often in their heads and this allows them to have fun and get out of that funky headspace of overthinking.

Have the students sing to each other - you often don't need to conduct. Just get them started and see what happens. It really bursts the bubble of "perfection" and reminds us all - we're making music. Relax.

### **Voicing:**

Students and directors alike get very caught up on voicing. We're often desperate for more tenors and basses while balancing altos and sopranos. Remember that young voices change and are versatile. Singers should absolutely be comfortable on their part - the goal is to find where their sound is richest and strongest. It's essential to take the time to vocalize your students and don't be afraid to move them around as necessary. High sopranos and low basses are typically easy to spot and hear - the middle voices are tougher. If you're not comfortable with vocal pedagogy, it will take a lot of trial and error. And honestly, even experienced voice teachers switch rep for their students. It's okay!

### **Sopranos:**

The beauty of the treble voice at F5 and above is key for sopranos. Are they able to maintain pitch with ease? Are they able to omit vibrato as needed? Is there color to the sound? Are they able to pop out a Bflat5 with ease? These are some of the signs of a strong choral soprano. Additionally, if their voice really gives out below middle C, there's no way they can handle the alto range. If you have a two part soprano split, I put my stronger readers on soprano 2. It's harder to hear.

### **Altos:**

The trick with altos is to consistently have them work through the middle break (G4-B4) and build a strong head voice. Many young alto will shy away from singing what they perceive to be "high" - often anything past C5. It's important that



warm-ups work through their break and up to higher registers. They will often be plenty confident in their lower range, sometimes pushing too much - it can distort the purer vowels we want to achieve in choral music. I often encourage a “hooty” or darker sound and will imitate that classical mezzo/alto tone for them. Nine times out of ten, what they perceive as an exaggerated tone is exactly what I’m looking for! Altos can also be some of your strongest readers as they’re not on the melody (in a lot of traditional choral music). Don’t let them think their head voice is weak or the enemy!

### **Tenors:**

Ha! Oh tenors - ever elusive and we often put too much pressure on the ones that can really nail the pitches with accuracy and grace. The changing voice is precarious and for biological boys, it takes YEARS for the singing voice to actually settle. I find that if they can negotiate between D4 and F4 with minimal strain, they can handle most choral repertoire. The other sign is bottoming out around C3. Young tenors (and basses) often have limited ranges - hone in on where they are comfortable and keep extending above and below. Again, vocal slides, lip buzzing, and shouts/calls can really help with this. Have your tenors practice going from their falsetto to a more mixed/chest voice. They need to learn that the vocal “flip” or mechanism past the passagio should not be not aggressive.

### **Basses:**

Singers that produce a warm, easy tone C3 and below are signature basses for choir. That said, they too should not be left off the hook of vocalizing past D4. Their break is usually around A4 and B3 and regular work through that break must be done. Falsetto exercises help strengthen this transition through the passagio. Basses will often try to push their sound or mimic older singers. Encourage a gentle onset of tone and don’t let the lower register become abrasive. We have all encountered the young bass who sings an octave lower than written - have all basses match that lower octave and practice sliding up. Start with a major 3rd, then perfect 5th, and finally an octave. It takes time and patience, but I have found this to be most effective. Additionally, short staccato exercises are great for lower voices. They can often sing higher when they have less time to overthink it. “Ha ha ha” is great - putting an ‘H’ onto the onset of pitch is crucial.

\*It should be noted that every singer is different and great care needs to be taken when applying any new technique. Some students may find it difficult or even off-putting. That is why your classroom environment and your own comfort with your voice and skill is paramount. You must OWN what you are teaching and be able to confidently demonstrate what it is you’re asking for. Don’t take yourself too seriously - students see right through that insecurity\*



Jon Timmons is the Director of Choral Activities at Souderton Area High School. At SAHS, Jon conducts seven choirs and teaches music theory. Jon is an active advocate and clinician for LGBTQ singers in addition to specializing in vocal pedagogy for choirs. For 16 years, Jon has performed and taught in the Philadelphia metro area including appointments at Brandywine Heights Area High School and Hatboro-Horsham High School. Prior to public school teaching, Jon taught voice and choir through Music Training Center in New Jersey, maintaining a voice studio of over 40 students.

For three seasons, Jon sang with the Philadelphia Singers - former resident choir for the Philadelphia Orchestra. During that time, he sang under accomplished conductors Charles Dutoit, David Hayes, and Jane Glover. He has maintained an active professional singing career as the baritone section leader in the Lansdale, PA based choir, 'The Choristers'. He has been a featured soloist in Faure's *Requiem*, Handel's *Messiah*, Herbert Howells *Requiem*, Leonard Bernstein's *Candide*, and Mozart's *Requiem*. His singing has brought him around the world to destinations including Beijing China, Salt Lake City Utah, and The Kimmel Center in Philadelphia.

Jon's choirs have performed at numerous festivals in the region and are praised for their balance, blend, and tone. He has presented at numerous Pennsylvania Conferences; the most recent being the PMEA State Conference in 2023. In 2020, his choir was chosen to perform at the PMEA Annual Conference - unfortunately canceled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, Jon has led many seminars at several professional development events advocating for LGBTQ youth and faculty.

Jon holds a Master's degree in vocal performance from the University of Delaware in addition to degrees and certification from Temple University and York College of Pennsylvania. An avid runner, Jon enjoys time with friends and family outside of teaching and singing. He resides just outside of Philadelphia with his two cats, Ollie and George.