

KEYNOTES

Sowing the Seeds for Perennial Vocal Health

by Lillian Quackenbush

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nce upon a time in the land of choraliers,

there lived an old woman. Although her hair had turned grey and her face and hands were wrinkled, she still loved to sing. Her voice was not as strong as it once had been, but the tone was still clear and steady. Morning, noon, and night her family would hear her humming and singing the songs she loved best.

On Sundays she would be the first one to the choir room to put on her robe, put a cough drop in her pocket, get her music and hymnal ready and take her seat, eager to begin. On Mondays she would finish her dinner early, pack her music in a travel folder and head to the town hall for the local choral society rehearsal. On Wednesdays she would be back at church rehearsing for Sunday, and on Thursday morning she met with the ladies choral society for yet another rehearsal. She had been singing for a long time.

When she was a little girl, she had sung in the cherub choir at church. In school she had always loved Tuesdays, since that was music day. She'd sung in high school in the girls' chorus and in the mixed choir,

and helped start a youth choir at church. Although she had never sung a solo, or even a duet for a church service or anything else, she had a sense of joy and excitement when she thought about going to rehearsals, or services and especially concerts. Her family and friends loved to hear her talk about her singing because she always had a twinkle in her eye and a smile on her face when she talked about it. For her, singing was a pre-taste of heavenly life and the very best this life had to offer.

This may sound like “never-never land” to you, but to the average choral singer, such love, devotion and joy in singing is not uncommon. Living at the end of the twentieth century in such a “sports minded” culture, it may surprise you to know that the numbers of people involved

in choral singing are greater than those involved in any other group activity. At every stage of life, from the time children are old enough to sing the simplest songs in groups singing for nursery school programs, church pageants and services, to youth music camps and community choral societies, we perpetuate this ritual of group singing. With so much singing going on, what are we as choral directors offering our singers that will help them continue not only their love of singing but the ability to sing well for a lifetime?

As choral directors we should have one mission—to create, sustain, and encourage a lifetime of healthy singing in those who have put their vocal health in our hands. In preparing our choirs for performances, it is too easy to justify our need to ask our singers to do unhealthy things with their voices in order to achieve the right balance, save time, etc. However, no short term goal like “I’ll need you to sing alto this year”, “louder, I can’t hear you”, or “higher, stretch for that note” should ever be substituted for what we know as healthy vocal production. Just as you would not encourage a diabetic to have “just one little piece of candy,” you should not encourage a singer to

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go beyond reasonable limits of range, dynamics, or breath.

Take the time to get to know your singers. Examine their voices individually, not as a tool to “weed” but as one to “feed.” Singers of all ages come equipped with voices that will respond positively when given the right suggestions. Your job is to know the right suggestions and to give them in a positive, productive manner so your choristers feel good about themselves, the tone is improved, the musical possibilities are increased, and you reap the benefits of sowing the seeds of good vocal production.

Sounds easy, doesn't it? Like all things worth doing, it takes planning, persistence, and patience. Start with a plan. Evaluate your own knowledge of vocal technique. If you find you only have a thimbleful, there are a number of places you can begin to get yourself more fully informed. This issue of *The Chorister* can be your first step, and then explore back issues for articles about voices of all ages. There are basic singing techniques that apply to singers of every age; so stay open to possibilities. Look for workshops about singing and about choirs throughout the year. Every major denomination has workshops that are both fun and informative—take a vacation at one of them. The college or university near you probably has a faculty member who teaches voice class or adjunct faculty who teach private lessons. If you don't live near one, ask your friends and colleagues for names of qualified persons in your area who are teaching privately. Invest your time and ask your church or school to invest some financial resources in training you to do a better job.

Explore your local library for books on singing. Ask if they have issues of *The Journal of Singing*, a publication of the National Association of Teachers of Singing or of *The*

Choral Journal, a publication of the American Choral Directors Association. These journals contain numerous articles on vocal production and ads for books, videos, and tapes on vocal technique. Petition your budget committee to provide funds for you to invite a choral director you admire to spend a Saturday with your choir to work on vocal technique. Join the local choral society and learn how to build better choristers by having to be one!

Persist in your own search for understanding the voice and in encouraging your choristers to develop and sustain good vocal habits. A few voice lessons won't make you an expert. (A little knowledge is a dangerous thing!) It takes time to truly understand the voice and to become proficient in using and teaching good vocal habits. You should strive toward improvement and understanding, not toward the finished product. Don't become satisfied. “It was good enough for the parents” or similar statements tells much about our ability to gloss over poor preparation and a lack of commitment to excellence.

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Keep focusing on long term goals as you plan your rehearsals and programs. Allow adequate time in your schedule to provide for warm ups, stretch breaks, and pacing which will allow your singers to do their best work. You'll probably hear some grumbling when you change from

“note-bashing” rehearsals to ones that focus on healthy expressive singing. When your choristers hear and feel the results of time spent vocalizing, correcting vowels, and energizing the tone with breath, they'll thank you for your dedication to their vocal health and the improved quality of the music.

Be patient. A few weeks ago I auditioned a wonderful soprano who had spent several years singing professionally with opera companies in Europe. During our conversation she admitted not knowing how to truly control the dynamics of her voice throughout the range until she had become a choir director. As a soloist she only had to be concerned with the projection of the tone and with, more often than not, singing loudly. Then when she became a choral director, she had singers who needed to know how to blend the voice with others and suddenly she needed to become an expert in soft, vital singing. (I wonder what her solo singing might have been like during the prime of her career had she known how to do that kind of singing first!)

She is an excellent example of our need to continue to learn throughout our lives. Voices are very small things and the muscles that control the mechanism are not built to withstand much stress. Long rehearsals are not the answer. Maximize the time you have by concentrating and focusing on the production of the sound in a five minute warm up. A choir of any age will sing more correctly for the entire rehearsal with fewer stops to correct vocal problems, and less stress on the singers' voices if you commit to it.

Singers of all ages deserve our best. Are we committed to asking the best of them? Prepare yourself by investigating good vocal techniques, knowing your choir's vocal needs, and planning rehearsals that emphasize vocal health. Persist in focusing

on long term goals that will result in a better choral tone as well as healthier singers. Practice patience. Conducting batons are not magic wands. Don't expect miracles, work to allow them to happen, and you'll all sing happily ever after.

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