1. The Constant Challenge:
Helping the Out-of-Tune Singer

Theoretically, they are labeled by different terms – monotones, uncertain singers, untuned singers, pitch problems, inexperienced singers, non-singers, droners and other descriptive titles. If you have a choir selected by audition, and are able to have a carefully screened group, there is no necessity for your learning to help and enable the less vocally gifted children. However, in workshops and singing courses, one of the major concerns of teachers of young children (kindergarten through fourth grade and beyond) is the child who cannot sing in unison with other voices. This unsolved problem demands a constant search for new ways to identify, classify, motivate, encourage and enable. There are many scientific studies being done, and many doctoral theses being written. There is much experimentation with computer technology, and much new information about how the control center of the brain functions in areas of pitch awareness.

Most researchers agree on several points:

1.) Children need to become **aware** of pitch fluctuations in their speaking and singing voices.

2.) They must have experience in **unison** singing with other voices, and must be aware of the unison sensation.

3.) Every physically and mentally able child can learn to sing.

4.) Early childhood is the most effective time for remedial help with singing problems.

5.) For many children, being unable to produce a singing sound is a developmental problem rather than one of deficiency.

Now, way down deep you may sometimes wish these children weren't there to have to deal with. Your choirs would sound better without them. True. Sometimes they cause behavior problems because they feel "sub-average," and are occasionally the targets of ridicule. True.

Sometimes they are the most loyal and enthusiastic of the choir children, and are present at every rehearsal, come summer heat or winter sleet. True.

As a Christian leader, you are as much concerned with the needs of the musically sub-average as you are with the talents of the more musically gifted child. True.

As a musical director, you want the total sound of your choir to reveal something of beauty and clarity for the services of worship. You cannot allow unrestrained dissonance to take precedence over the melody and text of the choir's offering. True.

What is the solution? I should like to be able to send each of you – special delivery – a neat little package containing "perfect pitch" pills, or some other magic potion! But all I can offer are suggestions of approaches which have proved successful, and to tell you that whatever effort you put forth is well worth your time and patience if you are able to open the world of song to these youngsters.

Some practical suggestions

At the beginning of the choir season, arrange to have a private two-minute singing encounter with each child. Keep a record of those who cannot sing on pitch. I prefer to have them sing a song rather than a scale. For younger children, "Happy Birthday," "Jingle Bells," or some other easy, everyday tune will serve the purpose. If they sing it well in tune, have them echo several yoo-hoos which you sing or play on the piano. (Some children can match a sung pitch but not a piano pitch.) I also note what musical instrument they might be studying. From this short singing encounter, I can pretty well categorize the pitch-problem children into one of three general groups.

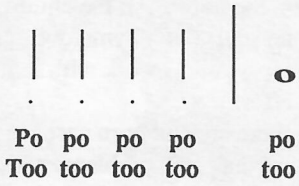
Group 1

– Those who can sing and match a tone in the head voice (light register), but cannot sing a scale or a melody in tune with another voice

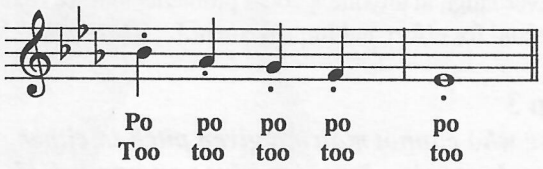
This is often caused by a too-relaxed **mental** attitude. Singing on pitch requires the mental discipline of concentration.

When you have one or several children who fall into this category, arrange to have occasional ten or fifteen minute sessions with them. Check individually by having each child match several sounds with you. Using a consonant before the vowel encourages pitch security and rhythmic accuracy.

Sing on a unison pitch:



If they can sing this on pitch, have them echo a descending five tone scale on similar sounds.

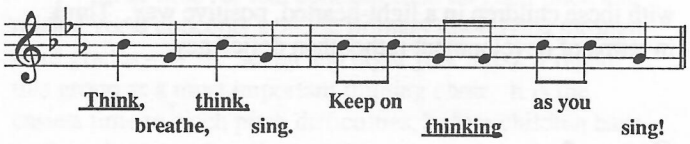


Remember that these children need practice, repetition and positive feedback for small successes. A child's **awareness** of same pitch or different pitch is a necessary stage of development.

Within this group are the children who are "vocal wanderers" – those who have difficulty echoing a sequence of pitches. They fluctuate above and below the pitches. They allow their voices to "fall" into a lower range when singing with other children. This is usually caused by a lessening of concentration. Their sense of personal "pitch-responsibility" diminishes when they hear other singers around them. Sometimes they attempt to sing too loudly when others are singing with them. When they do this they are not **listening** as they sing. Keep insisting that they sing with their **ears** and their **eyes** as much as they do with their throats and vocal cords. **Listen** must be the key word.

Another tendency with "wanderers" is that they breathe in and sing out almost at the same time. This always results in a "panicky" first tone, and very often results in a whole phrase sung off pitch.

"**Think**, breathe, **think**, sing, keep on **think-ing** as you sing!"



You will find another tendency among these children. If they **gasp** for a breath, they will often sing too high. This is sometimes the case when a child is trying very hard to please you. Timid or less conscientious children usually take in very little breath and sing listlessly, low, or whispery. Although the amount of breath does not determine the pitch, the process of breathing properly (stand tall, expand rib cage, relax shoulders) is a real factor to consider. Remember that many young children are swimmers. Breathing for swimming and singing have a lot in common. Take advantage of the athletic analogies.

The gasping breath usually is accompanied by raised eyebrows, lifted chin and tense neck muscles. Gasping usually means high-chest breathing, which is sometimes referred to as "nervous breathing." It has a definite effect on pitch since it creates tension. Teaching children to expand the lower portion of the rib cage, so the air can go down deep into their lungs, will actually help them to be more poised and better able to **concentrate**, which is a prime requirement for improving pitch. Some vocal wanderers suffer from the "jitters," and need to learn to focus attention. Quiet, firm, consistent guidance is required. With individual help, children in this group improve greatly and can become contributing singers. Work with these children in a light-hearted, positive way. Think in terms of development rather than deficiency.

Group 2

– Those who sing in a low-pitched chest voice

Be careful with this group to determine whether the problem is a matter of ear or vocal concept. If a child sings a melody with the correct intervals, but perhaps an octave lower than the given pitch, it is usually due to an inability to sing in head voice. The child has not yet discovered what it "feels like" to sing in the upper, light register. The best device I know to establish head tone in children is the fire-siren "Whooo." (You should master this sound yourself in order to demonstrate.) Start on a medium low tone and soar up to perhaps high E or F, returning to a lower pitch, all in one vocal sweep. It is important to keep thinking the *oo* sound at the highest pitch, rather than allow it to become *wow*.

A vigorous, free arm movement helps children to visualize the spontaneous rise of pitch. Try drawing this curve of pitch, freely, on the chalkboard as the child sings. Watch for stretched necks. If the child tries to carry a chest (speaking) voice up, the neck muscles will protrude and the child will not be able to sing above perhaps a fourth line treble clef D. Try placing your hand lightly on the child's head to keep the chin from jutting up and forward. Have the child lower the head slightly while making the siren sound. Children usually have to be convinced that the sound is **smaller** and has to be focused forward, instead of straining upward like a weight-lifting device.

Boys like to imitate their fathers or other men they admire, and in this attempt to be masculine sometimes push their voices into a low, "speaking-voice" chest sound. Explain that if they want to have good adult male voices when they grow up, they need to develop fine boy voices now. Also, it is important for boys to understand that singing high is not exclusively "girl singing." It takes energy, vitality and strong bodies for both boys and girls to sing a clear, full tone. Spontaneity, confidence and projection are all included in this concept.

Occasionally a child discovers the head voice in that upper range, and almost immediately the whole concept of singing changes. With others it comes slowly with constant checking and reminding. Much depends on the model sound children hear **consistently** enough to imitate.

During rehearsals, I always make my listening rounds – going along each row of children as they sing. When I come to one of the octave or fifth-low children, I place my finger on their forehead and with the index finger of the other hand make a cheerful sign upward. Most of them will get back on the track. All the children keep on singing, repeating one stanza of a hymn until I have heard everyone. No one stops while I work with individuals. It makes a good team effort.

Of course, there are stubborn cases in this group – not stubborn **children**, but pitch problems which require patience and individual help outside of choir time. I have found that boys and girls are very willing and anxious to work even in the choir rehearsal with all the other children there. There is one golden rule for all children to learn – "We never laugh at anyone's vocal problems, but we rejoice and applaud for effort and improvement."

Group 3

– Those who cannot match a given pitch in either head or chest voice, but do produce an unmusical sound of their own creation.

This comes closest to being a real monotone group, and of these you will have very few. These children require your individual attention and training outside the rehearsal period. Try to develop a close relationship with them, working for only short periods of time – five minutes of concentrated effort.

Begin with a single tone-matching process. If the child cannot match you, **you** match the child's pitch. Ask if it sounds the same. (The child will usually be able to hear this.) Now sing another pitch – if really a monotone, the child will sing louder or softer on the same pitch and think it is different. Now sing a semi-tone above the child to make the vibrations clash. Ask if it is the same. He or she will usually say "no." If answer is correct, praise the child's efforts of concentration. "You are learning to **listen** with your **mind** and your **ears** and your **voice**!"

You must have a private agreement with this child that, while developing the inner-listening ear and learning to sing on pitch, the child must "**listen** much louder than he or she sings." Stress the importance of **thinking**, and of singing quietly.

In your short private sessions, try the fire-siren "whooo" to see what the child's range is. Make every effort to have the child discover the head voice. Then try short melodies, phrases of hymns, choir songs, etc. Praise small improvements, and try to stop the session at a point where something has been done successfully.

In this third group, too, are the children who seem to suffer from chronic hoarseness – extremely breathy, labored singing. This is a physical thing, perhaps brought on by forced speech habits or infant colic. I find this problem the most difficult to handle.

These children look so uncomfortable as they sing and find it hard to sing more than two or three notes without taking in more breath. Try all the tricks mentioned above. Have them drop their jaws, sing through their eyes, pull an imaginary string from a little imaginary hole in the top of their heads, think a smaller sound, and do fire sirens, yoo-yoos, echo calls, etc. Let parents know how you are trying to help, but keep the problem a kind of relaxed, long-term project. If you develop this child's confidence in your "team effort," he or she will understand when you privately remind, "**listen** louder than you sing," on certain songs at certain times.

The time for real concentration on good pitch and related vocal concepts is in the primary choir (first through third grades – or six, seven and eight year olds). I regard this group as a most important training choir. It is the easiest time to catch pitch difficulties, before children have well-set habits and well-formed concepts of singing sounds.

Within these three **general** groups just discussed are a "**variety pack**" of individual vocal types which you can expect among unauditioned children ages five through nine. To help you think constructively about these "emerging singers," let us summarize in this three column chart. Use the open space to add ideas of your own and things you would like to try with some of your individual choristers.