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CHAPTER 3

The Uncertain Singer

Use what talents you possess; the woods would be very silent if no birds sang there except those that sang best.

Henry Van Dyke

BACKGROUND

For several years I was on the part-time staff of the Faculty of Education at the University of Toronto, teaching elementary music methods to prospective elementary classroom teachers. Time after time, students would rush up to me after a lecture and say, "I can't possibly do that!"

"Why not?" I would inquire."

"Because, I can't sing!" replied the perturbed student.

"Who said you couldn't sing?" I asked.

"When I was in grade two, I was allowed only to mouth the words. Mrs. ___ told me I couldn't sing."

How cruel! How untrue!

The thoughtless remarks made by teachers have affected these students all their lives. While it is true that some people are better singers than others, just as some people are better than others at any skill, most people can be trained to sing, *with the possible exception of those with a physiological problem that only surgery can help.*

Definition

The word *monotone* is often used incorrectly to describe uncertain singers. It literally means "without change of pitch," but, in actual fact, all children are capable of making several pitch changes in infancy, particularly octave leaps. Children's choir conductors must refrain from using the word monotone; and, instead, should explore the reasons children have trouble matching pitch, and try to find solutions to the problems.

Reasons for Inability to Match Pitch:

1. Inexperience and Lack of Exposure: Children learn by imitation, and if they have not been encouraged by their families to sing, and have not been exposed to good singing, they have nothing on which to build their singing skills.
2. Psychological: Singing is the expression of one's emotions, and if a child is very shy, lacks self-confidence, and has not been encouraged to sing, singing will take longer to develop. Children who experience difficulties with learning in school often have difficulty with singing in tune.
3. Immaturity: Children develop at different rates. Some children are ready to read in Grade 1. Others aren't. The same holds true for singing.
4. Poor Models: If a child has heard little else except hard rock music sung in a hoarse, chesty voice, the child will try and sing that way, too.
5. Underdeveloped Auditory Memory: If a child cannot concentrate and focus his or her attention aurally, that child won't be able to remember simple two-bar phrases.
6. Lack of Motivation and Interest: If the teacher/music director doesn't work in a stimulating and positive environment where the energy is high and the activities interesting, the child will be easily distracted.

ORGANIZATION

Seating Plan

- As usual, a seating plan is essential.
- I often have four rows of fifteen, with the altos on my right.
- Organize by height, and mix the weaker and stronger voices.
- Same system as primary (A1, A2, A3 etc.).
- Numbering at the beginning will save confusion.
- Row D leads on and off the stage and the children at the ends of each row are the “markers” who lead the rows on and off stage.

Who Sings Alto?

Singing alto at this stage in vocal development depends on “ear”, that is, the ability to easily sing a harmony part, not necessarily on vocal colour or range. Singing a harmony part is much more difficult than singing the melody, and only those singers with a good ear will be able to manage it.

Care *must* be taken, however, that a child who is really a high soprano does not sing alto for all three years. The children should also be told they are singing alto for the musical experience that it will give them, not necessarily because of their vocal range. When they go on through school, they could wind up singing soprano. (Singing teachers do have students whose voices were ruined singing tenor or alto in school choirs, in a range that was not suitable for them. Beware! Refer to Larra Browning Henderson’s book, *How to Train Singers*.)

Chair Set-Up

For the all-important chair set-up and seating plan, see Chapter 7, The Primary Choir, under “Organization.”

PROCEDURE

1. Teach everyone in the class or choir a simple two-bar phrase by rote. I usually do it to tonic sol-fa.
2. A group of about eight then come up to the front and you teach them the alto part.



3. Repeat the soprano part again. Some will have forgotten.
4. Now sing in two parts. Walk up and down the row of eight, listening to each one individually. There will be some who sing the harmony easily and some who struggle. Tap on the shoulder those who sing it easily and then have them all sit down.
5. Repeat procedures 2, 3 and 4 with a different group of eight each time. The rest always sing soprano.