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### Recruiting, teaching, and inspiring middle school male choral singers

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# Recruiting, Teaching, and Inspiring Middle School Male Choral Singers

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## **Introduction**

Today's popular culture in America places much attention on music through television shows such as *Glee* and *American Idol*. Many people might argue that these shows inspire students to participate in chorus and music classes in their schools. However, it might be more accurate to say that these shows inspire *girls* to participate in chorus and music classes in their schools, as more females than males watch these shows (Gorman 2010). Unfortunately, in a society in which males are told to reject "feminine" traits and embrace masculinity, *Glee*, *American Idol* and other shows more popular amongst females will not have the same effects in encouraging male participation in chorus. Since the American culture fails to inspire (and sometimes discourages) males to sing in choir, the attraction to chorus and the ability to sing must be nourished and taught in the public school system. Because many males view singing to be a feminine activity and are therefore scared to try singing in fear of being made fun of, music teachers and the whole school community must create an environment in which singing in chorus is not only accepted by everyone, but encouraged by everyone.

During middle school, boys are undergoing many changes due to biology and an attempt at defining who they are. In Patrick Freer's article on possible selves and music, he states "adolescence is the life phase focused on identity development during which young people try on possible selves without commitment or self-definition" (Freer 2010, 20). Middle school boys, therefore, should try out different activities that might define who they are, with no expectation of long-term commitment to these activities. Unfortunately, due to pressures from a male dominant society and fears of being rejected either by their peers or by the music teacher, boys often do not even try to participate in

chorus. They are afraid of the unknown; to many boys with changing voices or no previous experience in music, choral singing seems unattainable. Thus, these boys have many needs, questions, and worries that will go unresolved and unanswered unless teachers directly address them. Therefore, in order to teach middle school-aged boys that participation in chorus is acceptable and beneficial, teachers must address the unique needs and thoughts of these boys by employing single-gender instruction, teaching boys how to use their changing voices, and providing male role models that inspire these boys to see themselves singing in the future.

### **I. Why Should Boys Sing?**

Before diving into *how* to get boys to sing, it is important to discuss *why* boys should sing. According to a survey of high school band, orchestra, and choir students done by Adderley, Kennedy, and Berz in 2003, “students are ‘intellectually, psychologically, emotionally, socially, and musically nurtured by membership in performing ensembles’” (quoted in Sweet 2010, 6). These students enjoyed the social aspects of being in a musical ensemble such as the friends they made in the ensembles and the support systems that ensembles provide (Sweet 2010, 6). In a study done by Bridget Sweet in 2010, boys in middle school choir said they enjoyed singing because they found it to be fun and were proud that they could show off their talents (Sweet 2010, 8). These students have been exposed to a strong choral program and have been taught well in how to use their voice and perform music. They have given singing a chance, and realize that it is fun to do. Music teachers echo these positive benefits of choral singing

and many studies have been conducted that have found additional benefits of singing in a choir.

According to the National Association for Music Education (NAfME), participation in choir improves the following:

- team building skills, listening and following skills, creativity, and discipline
- the ability to focus and concentrate
- skills of expression, persistence, and problem solving
- responsiveness to others, and the ability to understand the needs of the whole group, vs. just the self
- positive social skills, skills in conflict resolution, and the ability to express emotion
- courtesy to and tolerance of others (Rarus 2008)

For middle school boys, these are all important qualities that they may be missing out on in other classes, such as language arts or math. In these classes, a student might be more focused on worrying about his grades and learning the material instead of practicing the skills described above. In chorus class, the students are learning academic material as a team, thus practicing the above skills with lots of peer support. Athletics and sports teams are other activities that teach students many of these skills, but chorus allows boys to develop these skills in a less competitive and more artistic environment.

All of the reasons mentioned above are used quite frequently to advocate for music education, but it is also important to remember that learning about music and how to sing are main goals and benefits of any choir program. Unfortunately, these qualities are not as important to many people in today's society, especially boys, as "we live in a culture where male singing is more the exception than the rule and has been declining since the 1930s" (Demorest 2000, 38). If music and singing can be so beneficial to both boys and girls, how can one change the minds of America's youth and erase the

stereotypes that have long been associated with singing? First, one must understand why these stereotypes exist in the first place.

## **II. Hegemonic Masculinity in Chorus**

In his book, *How High Should Boys Sing?*, Martin Ashley discusses in great detail the social stigmas and stereotypes that turn boys off from singing. He writes a lot about people in a Western culture viewing singing as a feminine activity, especially for boys with unchanged voices, and the fact that boys do not want to be seen as feminine. However, he follows this thought with the even bigger question of “*what is so wrong with sounding like a girl anyway? What is so wrong with girls and women that they must be avoided like the ‘pox’ and kept in place as second-class citizens?*” (Ashley 2009, 10). To this, he answers that it is because today’s Western culture is so deeply embedded in patriarchy and the superiority of adult males over women and children (Ashley 2009, 10).

In describing the dominance of adult males in America, Ashley draws on the writings of Robert W. Connell and his idea of Hegemonic Masculinity. Hegemonic Masculinity is defined by Connell as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell 2005, 77). This idea refers to men having the main interests of “sport, self and money” and displaying themselves as superior to women and children (Ashley 2009, 10). Even at a young age, boys strive to assert their roles as dominant males and in doing so reject activities that make them seem feminine, or in other words, subordinate. Ashley argues that it is the hegemonic male that oppresses both

women and children; for boys that may want to take part in so called “feminine” activities are told by society that they should not (Ashley 2009, 11). Although other factors such as social class or religion also influence boys’ participation in chorus, gender and hegemonic masculinity are certainly some of the main reasons why there are so few boys involved in chorus.

Furthermore, hegemonic masculinity causes boys to be uncomfortable with their physical traits before and during puberty. The physical trait that most affects boys’ participation in chorus is the unchanged and changing voice. While sports offer boys the chance to change their physical appearance into a more “masculine” one by developing muscles, singing may make boys feel less “masculine” if they are singing in a higher range because their voices have not changed. Freer writes “When boys can use their developing bodies to achieve success in athletics while simultaneously experiencing failure in choral music, the quote by American adventure author Zane Grey (1909) becomes more and more of a reality: ‘All boys love baseball. If they don’t they’re not real boys’” (Freer 2010, 23). In a society full of hegemonic masculinity, boys will most often choose the activity that makes them feel masculine, and reject the activity that makes them feel less masculine, which to them means feminine.

Boys that are brave and try singing often become frustrated by their changing voices. When middle school teachers group all of the boys together on one part, this creates several problems because all of these boys are at different stages of their voice change. Irvin Cooper, who pioneered a new range called the Cambiata for boys with changing voices, indicated, “none of the boys can sing comfortably when singing in unison which obviously results in tense singing” (Collins). When boys feel tense or

uncomfortable when singing, or simply cannot sing notes that are not in their range, boys feel like they are failing. Freer writes that “boys seek experiences where they can be successful” (Freer 2010, 23). If they perceive that they are failing in music, they will not want to participate anymore. If boys are already scared to participate in chorus due to the limitations of hegemonic masculinity, why would they want to participate in chorus if the majority are going to feel like they are failing? Many middle school choral programs in the United States do not address the societal pressures or the feelings of failure experienced by boy singers at this age. In order to overcome these problems, choral teachers must fundamentally change the way they teach middle school choirs. The next part of this paper will focus on how to make boys want to participate in chorus by stating innovative ways to recruit, teach, and inspire boys to sing and keep singing.

### **III. Recruiting Middle School Boys to a Positive Environment in Chorus**

To be able to teach boys that singing is accepted and a positive experience, teachers must first have boys enrolled in chorus class. In schools in which the arts are viewed as subordinate to other subjects and sports, this is a difficult task. Erin Belanger, a choir director in upstate New York, has been slowly expanding the number of boys in her chorus. She tries to incorporate repertoire that appeals to boys such as rock songs by The Beatles. She also makes an effort to get to know the boys in her school by attending sports games and making personal connections with them. Additionally, she has her choir perform the national anthem at sports games so that choir becomes a familiar part of her school. Lastly, she relies on incentives such as trips to perform in Disney World to recruit more students to her choir (Robinson 2010).

While these are all good tactics to build up a small choir program and recruit boys, there are additional factors that can enhance the number of boys in a choir program. In a middle school, one of the best ways to recruit boys is by teaching chorus in single-gender classrooms. Single-gender classes have become an opportunity in public schools through a provision added to the No Child Left Behind Act (Jorgensen and Pfeiler 2008). Prior to this provision, choral teachers had employed single-gender instruction through activities such as sectional rehearsals and treble choirs. However, sectional rehearsals are usually used to reinforce parts for a group of female voices and a group of male voices. Not much attention is given to teaching each gender how to use its unique voice. Furthermore, treble choirs are used as a way to “accommodate an abundance of girls” (Jorgensen and Pfeiler 2008). However, in a group with all females, the teacher can naturally address the characteristics and challenges of the female voice without taking time away from males, which happens quite frequently in a mixed voices ensemble. If schools adopted all male choral classes, the teachers could address the numerous challenges of the changing male voice without taking any attention away from the females. This would help students to learn how to use their voices and would cut down on a lot of classroom management problems because the teacher’s attention would always be on the whole class.

Nancy Smirl Jorgensen and Catherine Pfeiler outline some of the specific ways that single-gender chorus classes are beneficial to 9<sup>th</sup> grade boys in their article, *Successful Single-Sex Offerings in the Choral Department*. First of all, having only boys in the class gives the teacher a lot of opportunities to “correctly sort out voice parts” (Jorgensen and Pfeiler 2008). The teacher in this article separates the boys into tenor,

baritone, and bass because most of the high school boys in this article have changed voices. However, in a middle school, the boys will be separated into different parts depending on what stage of their voice change they are in. It is crucial to make sure middle school boys are comfortable with the range they are singing in choir, and these specific ranges will be explained in great detail in the next section.

Another benefit of single-gender classes is that boys and girls can both feel comfortable because they are not distracted or embarrassed by the opposite sex. “Colley et al. (1997) suggest that a single-sex teaching environment can encourage students to gain confidence that is crucial to ensuring the acquisition of important concepts in the music curriculum and continued participation” (Zemek 2010, 18). In an all male ensemble, the boys can be themselves and explore singing with support from other boys like themselves. Some boys may take on leadership roles that would normally be taken on by a female in a mixed chorus class. This is a significant help when recruiting boys to choir, because they will see confident boys being proud of being in choir, and they will be more willing to join. Finally, Jorgensen and Pfeiler make special note of competition developing between all male and all female ensembles. In middle school, this may be a big incentive for boys to join choir, and it will also aid in motivating the students to strive to improve their ensembles (Jorgensen and Pfeiler 2008).

In a society that views singing as a feminine activity, separating males and females will create the opportunity for males to experience choir as an activity for males. Although choirs cannot rid the United States of hegemonic masculinity, they can work around its stereotypes and create ways for boys to take ownership in singing in chorus. When a school employs single-gender chorus classes or even mixed chorus classes that

break up into sectionals frequently to address the unique needs of males and females, boys will begin to view singing in a choir as a masculine activity. Other boys in the school will then be more motivated to participate in choir and join the team of other boys.

#### **IV. Teaching Boys to Use Their Unchanged, Changing, and Changed Voices**

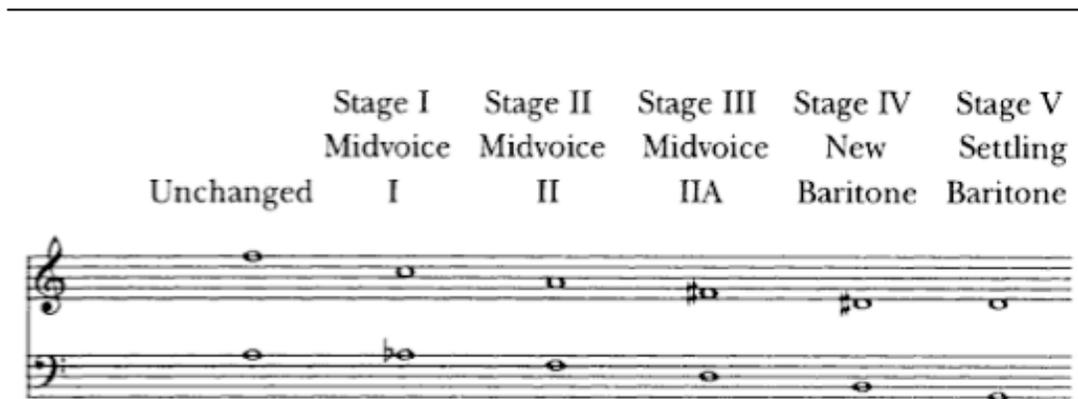
One major problem with many middle school (and high school) choral programs is the fact that many teachers are not able to teach boys and girls how to use their voices correctly. Some students might take private voice lessons outside of school, but the majority of singers, especially boys, have not had much experience singing and do not understand how their voices work. For students in band, especially in elementary school and middle school, small group lessons are provided through the school outside of band rehearsal to teach students how to use their instruments. During these lessons, students are able to ask their teacher questions about something that might be wrong with their instruments, learn about how the instruments work, and understand the different components that help students to feel more comfortable on their instruments, like different reeds or mouthpieces. In chorus classes, this attention to detail is rarely given to students, even in sectional rehearsals, because these rehearsals more often than not focus on making sure students are simply singing the correct notes.

With the implementation of single-gender classes described in the previous section, teachers will have the opportunity to teach students of each gender more specifically about their voices, especially during middle school when both boys' and girls' voices are changing. This section will describe several different theories on the

ranges of boys' changing voices and multiple ways to teach middle school boys about their unique voices.

In his book, *How High Should Boys Sing?*, Martin Ashley writes in great detail about the physiology behind boys' voices. He explains that one can locate the most comfortable singing range of a boy's voice by finding out the central speaking pitch, or modal point, of a boy's voice. He writes, "Crucially, the lowest note any singer can produce is usually between four and six semitones below the speaking pitch centre and, for the untrained voice, the range extends to between a sixth and a ninth above this" (Ashley 2009, 42). He also explains that between the ages of eleven or twelve and adulthood, a boy's speaking pitch center drops about an octave due to the doubling of the length of the vocal chords (Ashley 2009, 42). His knowledge of boys' vocal ranges comes from the theory of John Cooksey that boys' voices go through six mutational stages instead of one clear break (Ashley 2009, 45). The following chart from the NAFME website shows the six stages described by Cooksey:

***Changing voice stages among adolescent males (Cooksey)***



(Brown 2010)

Clearly, for a middle school mixed choir singing mostly SAB (Soprano, Alto, Baritone) music, it would be impossible to accommodate all six of these stages by placing all of the boys on the baritone part, or even the baritone and alto parts. However, this is what many middle school chorus teachers try to do.

Therefore, it is easier to accommodate the needs of the boys in each stage of Cooksey's mutations in an all male choir. Because it is extremely unlikely that middle school boys will be able to sing in six parts in the ranges that Cooksey describes, Irvin Cooper developed one middle range that could be sung by boys in the earlier stages of voice change called the *cambiata voice* (Ashley 2009, 48). To use the *cambiata voice*, Cooper published many songbooks that have arrangements of songs for the ranges of Sopranos (B<sup>b</sup>3 to F5), Cambiatas (F3 to C5), and Baritones (B<sup>b</sup>2 to F4) (Collins). The music that Cooper arranged can be ordered through the publishing company, the Cambiata Press. These arrangements can be used in middle school all male choirs by placing boys with unchanged voices on the Soprano part, or in mixed choirs by placing all of the girls and the boys with unchanged voices on the Soprano part. However, in an all male choir, the boys with unchanged voices will feel less embarrassed to be singing up high because they will not be singing with girls, and therefore feel less feminine.

Once boys feel comfortable singing in the correct range for their changing voices, it is often beneficial or necessary to get the boys to expand their ranges by using their "vocal chords in a way that is different to that used in normal speech" (Ashley 2009, 50). This register is commonly referred to as the "head voice" or perhaps the "falsetto". These two terms are sometimes used interchangeably and sometimes mean the same thing. Ashley claims, "much 'head voice' singing by choristers is likely to be falsetto,

particularly in the case of older boys who have passed from Cooksey's second to third stage without giving up the treble register" (Ashley 2009, 53). For this reason and others, it can be a challenge to explain to boys how to sing in a higher register, whether it is head voice or falsetto. To further complicate things, Henrich and Chapman and Morris claim that there are four different registers for all male voices. The lowest register is called the "Fry" by Chapman and Morris, and is hardly used in classical music. Then comes the modal range, which refers to the "chest voice" or the pitches that surround a boy's speaking voice used in Cooksey's mutations. Next is the head voice, and finally the falsetto. Unfortunately, Henrich claims that the falsetto is not well understood while Chapman claims that it is completely legitimate (Ashley 2009, 52-53). For the purposes of middle school choir, this disagreement is not of great importance. However, teaching boys to use their upper register, albeit head voice or falsetto, as well as their modal or chest voice is important to be able to perform a diverse repertoire of music.

Once a music teacher has a firm understanding of how a boy's changing voice works and the different registers of a boy's voice, he or she needs to pass this information along to her students. Boys, especially when they are in a single-gender rehearsal, will feel more comfortable knowing why their voice sounds like they do and that it is perfectly normal to sound like that. In their article entitled "Range is Everything" Janice Killian and John Wayman claim, "it's empowering for boys to know which stage they're in and which stage will come next. They can then conclude that their particular voice is normal" (Killian and Wayman 2010). One technique that Killian and Wayman suggest for discovering what stage of Cooksey's mutations a boy is in is asking him to count backwards from twenty to determine what his normal speaking pitch is. Then, "beginning

on his speaking pitch, have the boy sing the pattern of 1-5-4-3-2-1 on 'oo' as you play those pitches with him" (Killian and Wayman 2010). Then repeat this same pattern going up by half steps until he can go no higher. Finally, Killian and Wayman suggest telling him what stage he is in and what stage he will be in next, and encouraging him that this is perfectly normal (Killian and Wayman 2010). It may be extremely helpful and supportive for a teacher to post these ranges in her classroom so that the boys are always reassured that their voices are where they are supposed to be, no matter what society might tell them.

When selecting repertoire, Killian and Wayman reiterate that choosing music that fits students' ranges is extremely important. This can be accomplished by using music ordered from the Cambiata Press or by using TTB (Tenor, Tenor, Baritone) arrangements in all male ensembles and SAB (Soprano, Alto, Baritone) or SATB (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) arrangements in all female ensembles and modifying parts while keeping the integrity of the music (Killian and Wayman 2010). This can be difficult and time consuming, so if a teacher has at least some male trebles, cambiatas, and baritones, it may be a better idea to use music from the Cambiata Press in both mixed ensembles and all male ensembles. Mark Munson adds, "The labels 'three-part mixed' and 'SAB' are not used consistently among publishers, so you need to consider the ranges of each piece individually" (Munson 1998). Other elements to consider are avoiding "parallel harmonies (especially parallel thirds)" and "keeping lines short and repetitive" so that boys are more likely to stay on their own parts (Killian and Wayman 2010). Munson suggests that boys like repertoire that is energetic so they can release some of the physical energy that they have at the middle school age (Munson 1998).

Finally, teachers must help boys to expand their ranges and use their head voices by slowly introducing simple exercises with small ranges. Munson suggests exercises that have descending motion. He claims, “these exercises can help energize the higher pitches. The resonant Ns and Ys will help the boys pull the sound from the backs of their mouths and throats to the fronts of their faces” (Munson 1998). The feeling of the sound coming from the fronts of their faces is helpful when trying to explain to the boys what head voice or falsetto is. The most important thing to remember is that boys in choir need to feel comfortable with what they are singing. If the teacher chooses repertoire that effectively matches the ranges of boys with unchanged, changing, and changed voices, the boys will be successful singers. The next and final section of this paper will address ways to inspire boys to keep singing in high school and later in life so that singing becomes more the norm than the exception for males in the United States.

## **V. Inspiring Middle School Boys to Keep Singing**

Even if boys have experienced a very strong middle school choir program, it can be difficult to inspire them to keep singing in high school. In her interview with five very involved middle school boy singers, Bridget Sweet discovered that they might not want to continue singing in high school because they wanted “to invest energies in several directions during high school” (Sweet 2010, 9). The idea that boys drop choir to participate in other activities is echoed by many people including Steven Demorest, who claims that this also happens during middle school (Demorest 2000, 38). No matter how much fun boys had in chorus in elementary school or middle school, they may decide to discontinue singing because of the pressures of hegemonic masculinity, and feel like they

must participate in more sports or other activities. The most effective way to keep boys in choir as they head to high school is by providing them with other male role models to show them that they can continue singing while also pursuing other interests.

Steven Demorest runs a program called “A Workshop for Boy Singers” that lasts for one day and exposes 150 boys to singing in all male choirs of unchanged and changed voices. The highlight of the day, however, is the treat of hearing a “‘cool’ male a cappella group performing a popular blend of doo-wop and vocal jazz” (Demorest 1998, 40). The boys are usually also quite impressed by hearing a college group of all male singers performing difficult classical pieces of music (Demorest 1998, 40). Demorest suggests that school districts try to run workshops for boy singers using male singers from each of the schools in their district. By using strong high school male singers as role models for younger students, boys can better envision the type of male they will be in high school if they continue singing.

It is important for boys to have role models that do not seem foreign to them. Martin Ashley explains that when famous male singers, reality show singers, or even older adult male singers are used as role models for boys, the hegemonic stereotypes of males are reinforced and the “task of convincing ‘ordinary’ boys that their treble voices are an asset” becomes very difficult (Ashley 2010, 151). A celebrity such as Justin Beiber may seem undesirable to boys because of his “effeminate” looks and his female fan base. However, a more “masculine” celebrity role model such as Dave Grohl from the Foo Fighters would also not be an appropriate role model for middle school boys because their voices are still changing and will not sound like Dave Grohl’s voice. Therefore, teachers must provide boys with role models that are similar to them in areas such as

other interests, hometown, ethnicity, or social class. These role models should be only a few years older, so a couple of boy singers from the high school would be a great place to start. These boys must be able to show and explain that their voices changed when they were in middle school, and that it was perfectly normal. When boys who sing are reassured that there are others just like them in the world, the pressures of hegemonic masculinity that keep so many boys from singing will slowly go away.

## **Conclusion**

Adolescents in the United States today are taught by the media that they are supposed to act a certain way to fit in with society. Unfortunately for boys, fitting into society does not include singing or participating in choir due to the “feminine” qualities associated with singing. To further complicate matters, middle school boys experience awkward and uncomfortable changes to their bodies and voices that make them think that they will fail at singing. It is up to middle school chorus teachers to fundamentally change the way that they teach choir to better accommodate the needs of these boys. By separating males from the females in chorus classes, both genders will be getting the special attention that each of them needs and deserves. By teaching boys exactly what is going on with their voices and paying attention to the ranges of each and every male singer, boys will feel more comfortable singing and embrace the changes of their voices. Lastly, by inviting many approachable role models to visit middle school choir classes to encourage boys that they can keep singing in high school, the stereotype that males should not sing will disappear from that school and eventually from society.

This will only be achieved if music teachers throughout the country decide to try to change the way they teach their middle school choirs. Lately the media has been trying to inspire music in schools with shows like *Glee* and *American Idol*, but the characters and contestants on these shows seem very foreign to most middle school boys. Therefore, all music teachers must operate within their own school districts to ensure that the boys in their community think that singing in chorus is fun and cool. Only then will the idea of boy singers become a norm in American society so that boys can truly reap the numerous benefits of music education.

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