

The CAVE Project: Collaborative Approaches to Vocal Education

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Vocal education takes place in a variety of settings: private studios, small groups, classrooms and vocal ensembles of many sizes, types and genres. The benefits of such experiences have been documented at length, but little has been achieved in collaboration between the various factions. While most conflict appears to exist between vocal teachers and choral directors, classroom experiences and small group tuition models are worthy of investigation, as they may provide solutions to nexus that exists between rehearsal-based, large-group experiences and studio teaching processes.

This article seeks to review the existing literature from choral, small group, classroom and studio-based sources, to present insights based on recent fieldwork and offer some suggestions as to how collaboration might be progressed more effectively in the future.

The Beginnings

In 1995, a joint initiative between ANATS, ASME and ANCA examined the progress of vocal/choral music in Queensland schools. The value of the project, as reported by Jansen (1999, p. 73), was to

offer a taste into what might be, a taste of what vocal/choral education could become. It gives some further clues as to how choral programs could be further improved and the voice tuition of those programs developed. It also provides a modest basis for further research into the scope and nature of choral activity and singing teaching in Queensland schools.

As one of the few ventures in Australia to address singing issues in a collaborative manner, this report provides a useful starting point for the CAVE project. The CAVE project aims to take up this challenge to provide ways in which vocal educators can work together to improve the standard, profile and accessibility to singing experiences in a productive and healthy manner.

The Choral Perspective

Of the over 300 schools that responded to the ANATS/ASME/ANCA survey, 93% had a choral program. Classroom music teachers were responsible for directing almost 70% of those choral groups. As the capacity of teachers to undertake this task is of relevance, the training of these teachers is worth investigating further. According to Jansen (1999, p. 74), conductors reported their training as indicated in Table 1.

The data in Table 1 suggests that almost 25% undertook some tertiary training, more than 31%

gained their expertise from on-the-job training or their own experience of singing in a choir. The quality and content of any of these experiences cannot be guaranteed and it must be said that singing in a choir is vastly different from directing one. While it is possible that tertiary courses included some content related to singing and singing pedagogy, the 10% of conductors who had singing training is in contrast to the situation in the United States as reported by Daugherty (2001, p. 69):

Choral directors traditionally study pedagogy of the solo voice. Moreover, they often take a number of years of private voice lessons and if they are fortunate, may also avail themselves of work in vocal anatomy, voice care and how to teach voices in various stages of development.

Given that the choral system is somewhat different in the United States, this is not surprising and provides some insights for the Australian dilemma. Miller (1995, p. 31) found however that despite the importance of vocal pedagogy in the training of conductors in the United States, this did little to ease the tension between singing teachers and choral directors: 'There is a history of conflict in American academic circles between the training of the solo voice and what is expected of the singer in the choral ensemble. Such a conflict need not exist.'

TABLE 1

Training Experience of Choral Conductors

Undergraduate training in choral conducting	20%
Undertaken singing lessons	10%
Participated in professional development	16%
Sang in choirs themselves	20%
Training in Kodaly-based programs	5%
Some experience of conducting	11%
Postgraduate conducting training	4.5%

Source: Jansen, 1999.

TABLE 2
Members of Choirs Who Undertake Singing Tuition

	Membership (n)	Members taking lessons (n)	Members taking lessons (%)
Choir 1	160	2	1.8
Choir 2	90	18	20
Choir 3	40	5	12.5
Choir 4	60	2	3.3
Choir 5	24	2	8.3 [#]
Choir 6	50	7	14
Choir 7	60	3	5
Choir 8	9	3	33 [*]
Choir 9	68	4	5.8
Choir 10	130	32 [^]	24.6
Total	691	78	11.2

Note. [#] Community group

^{*} Auditioned group

[^] 11 students taking individual tuition and 21 taking group tuition.

Glover (2001, p. 17) has conducted extensive research in this area. She concurs, also calling for teachers to look for commonality rather than division:

choral directors and voice teachers often don't agree on what is best for their students and sometimes miss the opportunity to work closely and compatibly together to their greater advantage. Both have equal desire for the well-being of their students' voices and both work with the identical mechanism, but often an unhealthy distance or mistrust may exist between them.

Glover (2001, p. 17) further investigates the nature of the nexus of choral and individual involvement, claiming that singing is contextual: we sing differently in specific environments. Sociology supports the claim that people often behave differently in groups than they do as individuals: perhaps singers behave differently in ensembles than they do as soloists (Daugherty, 2001, p. 70). This notion finds further support from Glover (2001, p. 18) who maintains that 'the extent to which singers adjust their technique is largely dependent on the requirements of the director and his or her concepts of choral tone'.

Progress from this perspective relies on the capacity of the choral director to monitor the developing voice. As noted in Jansen's data earlier, there is little possibility of this occurring with current choral directors' (lack of) vocal training.

Several authors have focused on the idea of institutions taking some responsibility for singing training of music educators. Morphew (1996, p. 73) noted that 'the institutions responsible for teacher training are apparently not providing the basic courses for the satisfactory implementation of the singing activities in the primary school', while Morton (2004, p. 9) provided a number of recommendations for tertiary institutions noting that 'we need to develop career paths for choral leaders and ensemble singers that are financially viable to those individuals'. Morton also advocates incorporating school authorities and the TAFE sector to further advance choral training opportunities.

In seeking to find solutions to the choral/vocal nexus, Thurman and Daugherty (2003, p. 43) suggest that, 'reasoned, respectful and collegial dialogue about such a professional issue can only stimulate and contribute to the advancement of choral singing'.

Apfelstadt et al. (2003, p. 26) offer a number of ways in which conductors can build bridges by:

- communicating among themselves about voice part assignments, repertoire and specific trouble spots
- having the voice teacher come to rehearsal to work on a problematic spot
- having students take a particularly challenging spot to the lesson
- being flexible and open to discussion with colleagues.

Many of these suggestions have the support of the literature and (anecdotally) the singing community. They need to be employed more consistently and universally in order to have any significant impact. Because of their interaction with larger numbers of singers, choral directors and classroom teachers have the opportunity, power and responsibility to action progress this cause.

The Singing Teachers' Perspective

One of the contributing factors to the choral/vocal nexus would appear to be that individual studio teachers rarely have access to students in ensembles. To determine if this were the case, the author conducted a pilot study with ten choirs to ascertain the extent to which vocal tuition was taken by choristers. As Table 2 indicates, a small percentage of participants in vocal ensembles actually take tuition.

One of the data providers pointed out that if the choir were a smaller auditioned group, the percentages would be skewed. This is certainly the case in Choir 8, so the argument has some merit. As singing teachers, the apparent lack of tuition

undertaken by students is problematic: how to assist students that are not learning singing?

In his discussions on teacher identity, Harrison (2003) offers some suggestions by commenting that singing teachers (and choral conductors) need to recognise their own shortcomings: acknowledge that they may not have all the answers for a particular student. Furthermore, he remarks that reflective skills including recognition of limitations, openness to new ideas, willingness to seek advice and undertake professional development are vital ingredients in finding solutions to problems such as this. (2004, n.p.). Apfelstadt et al. (2003) also advocate this approach and it is central to collaboration between all those involved in teaching a student singing: recognising what each person (choral, individual, small group or classroom) knows and more importantly does not know.

What are the benefits and of each of these different ways of approaching singing? In the spirit of recognising our weaknesses, it would be wrong to assume that individual studio teaching is the only way in which one can learn the art of singing: Individual lessons, teaching in pairs, the small group model, vocal class, primary and/or secondary music classes and choirs all contribute to vocal tuition.

The Small Group Perspective

An investigation of the small group-teaching model is warranted as it is enjoying renewed research and practical implementation. In a paper justifying the small group-teaching model, Jansen (1994) states that one of the advantages of the small group-teaching model is access to expertise in the vocal area. Daniel (2003) also advocates this model of teaching piano, referring to student benefits including increased levels of interaction and critical analysis and exposure to additional oral and aural experiences. Jansen (1994) also states the disadvantages including:

- less attention being given to the individual,
- there can be a mismatch of ability in vocal, musical and intellectual levels.
- lack of social cohesion.

One could conclude that such disadvantages would be further entrenched in the choral setting, where larger numbers are involved and the goal is sometimes more performance focused. This argument is reinforced by Glover (2001, p. 22):

Depending on their experience, choristers may need to be somewhat more responsible for their own development, as the director is not always able to monitor the progress of each individual as closely as a vocal instructor. Members of the developing voice choir, however, would certainly require more individual attention than those in a more advanced group.

The small group model provides a better opportunity than the choir, but clearly not as good as individual instruction. Social cohesion is perhaps one element that is enhanced in the ensemble setting, yet it is the one-on-one relational skills that are the most significant in the teacher-mentor rela-

tionship (Harrison, 2003). Furthermore, there may be economic concerns that are overriding musical considerations in teaching through the small-group format. In summary, it is better than nothing, but falls short of the ideal.

Towards Solutions

Some common goals are apparent across formats. These goals might include as Apfelstadt et al. (2003, p. 25) suggest, 'a desire to promote healthy singing, to develop vocal musicianship and to maintain the integrity of the voice while doing justice to various musical styles' Christiansen (2003) supports this view, adding that there are psychological and physiological dimensions to group singing including discipline and self esteem. Morton (2004, p. 16) takes this even further

A comprehensive choral music education can become the core for studies in theory, music history, score analysis, aural skills, music reading skills, composition (through modelling) and performance.

Morton then goes on to describe in detail a class-based program in which the students' core music experience is a choral one. In Morton's rehearsals, he follows the suggestions of Apfelstadt et al. (2003) in that he has an experienced vocal pedagogue present. In addition, he is conscious of his own strengths and weaknesses and constantly seeks to address them through supplementing his choral process with other experts and professional development (personal communication).

The process of singing teachers and choral conductors working in the same room with the students is perhaps the most significant innovation to be made in this discussion: Collaboration has many faces, but there is little room for confusion when the two main contributors to vocal education are working together at the same time in the same place, each trying to achieve a result which is both satisfying to the ear and healthy for the voice.

The singing community in Australia is too small to countenance division. Furthermore, the societal forces against singing in the Australian community are too great. The recognition of the different but equally valid contributions of studio teaching, the small group model, vocal class, primary and/or secondary music classes and choirs in the process of vocal education is essential in achieving a collaborative approach. This is an area that requires further research. The aim of the CAVE project is to undertake such research to provide specific solutions to this ongoing problem.

Author Note

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