

How to Encourage Good Singing

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Having a structured lesson plan/classroom offers middle school students a set of behaviors to expect from themselves and from their teacher. With a sensitivity for flexibility when required, each class should move seamlessly from one learning event to the next. Learning events should include, although not limited to, the primary choral classroom pillars: (A) vocal development, (B) pitch development, (C) rhythm development, (D) melodic or harmonic sight-singing development, and (E) quality repertoire. Each unit should be constructed carefully to challenge, yet ensure success. In addition to organized structure, humor is the teacher's greatest ally.

In vocal development, to encourage a positive atmosphere, begin with "life sounds," imitations using unspecified pitches, such as the sounds made by animals (dogs, birds, farm animals, monkeys, hoot owls, wolves), roller coaster rides, ghosts, football and sumo wrestler grunts, laughing (HO, HO, HO, HO - HA, HA, HA, HA - HEE, HEE, HEE, HEE). The howling of a pack of wolves, or a contest for the "biggest hoot owl sound" always provides a variety of insights and positive results for the students and the teacher. Students should be given the option to play or pass. In a nonjudgmental classroom, the shy boys will eventually choose to join in. Another option that should always be available is the opportunity to "fix it."

When using unspecified pitch, everyone can succeed.¹ Specified pitch, however, is more problematic. For middle school boys, the typical five-pitch vocal pattern (So Fa Mi Re Do) is too demanding. The three-pitch pattern (Mi Re Do) can provide more flexibility for the teacher and be more vocally accessible to a middle school boy's singing voice.

The pedagogical challenge of choosing the appropriate key to encourage accurate pitch matching is essential for success.

¹ Phillips, Kenneth H. Phillips. *Directing the Choral Music Program* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

Finding the Appropriate Key to Fit the Student[s] Vocal Range

Individualized instruction:

Treble/Cambiata I, Phase A	Start in the key of C
Cambiata I, Phrase B	Start in the key of A
Cambiata II	Start in the key of F
Baritone, Phrase A	Start in the key of Eb
Baritone, Phrase B	Start in the key of C

Group Instruction:

CB	When working each section separately
	Cambiatas grouped together, start in key of F#
	Baritones grouped B start in key of D
	When working sections together and simultaneously
	CB at the octave in key of A
CCB	When working each section separately
	CI start in key of A
	CII start in key of F
	B start in the key of Eb
	When working each section together and simultaneously
	CI and B at octave in A
	(work separately) CII start in key of F

Specific Pitch Basics

1. Combine the [Z] consonant with the individual neutral vowel [oo]. Strive for the lifted, dome shaped soft palate: Zoo, Zoo, Zoo. Find the “lift” by pretending to take a drink from a water fountain, or by experiencing a cool air sip. Using a quarter note pattern, work up and down the chromatic scale.

2. Keeping the dome shape used to produce the [oo] vowel, work with the [Z+ih] and [Z+oh] vowels. Keep the vowels tall and vertical. Work up and down the chromatic scale.

3. Create complexity and variety by mixing the vowels Zoo, Zoo, Zih; Zoo, Zoh, Zih, and changing the rhythm: Example: dotted eighth, sixteenth, quarter.

4. Save the Zah and Zeh vowels for the end. These vowels are the hardest to master. The Zah vowel frequently falls too far back in the throat and becomes chesty, and the Zeh vowel encourages a diphthong.

Two Cautionary Notes

Middle school boys are too often encouraged to “sound like men.” The result is a dark, swallowed, chesty tone. Good singing includes a relaxed larynx (neither compressed nor lifted), a relaxed jaw and tongue, a lifted (dome shaped) soft palate, and a forward energized tone supported with a healthy supply of air.¹

In many settings the uncertain singer is a pedagogical challenge. Instead of asking the uncertain singer to match the teacher’s sound, the teacher should attempt to match the student’s sound. Getting the brain’s pitch matching synapse to fire is step one. Additional repetitive steps require the teacher and the student to get the pitch matching synapse to fire consistently. For additional ideas, see *Teaching Choral Music* by Don Collins.²

¹ Ware, Clifton. *Basics of Vocal Pedagogy: The Foundations and Process of Singing* (McGraw Hill, 1997)

² Collins, Don L. *Teaching Choral Music* (Prentice Hall, 2nd edition, 2000).
