Learning and Teaching through the Wellesley Preparatory Chorus

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Learning and Teaching through the Wellesley Preparatory Chorus

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# Table of Contents

1. **Background** ............................................................................................................................................... 3  
   Introduction ................................................................................................................................................. 3  
   Why a Training Choir? ................................................................................................................................... 3  
   Previous Beginning Choir Models .................................................................................................................. 4  
   My Background .......................................................................................................................................... 5  
   Mutually Beneficial Formation of the Group ................................................................................................. 5  

2. **Setting up a Choir** ................................................................................................................................... 7  
   Introduction .................................................................................................................................................. 7  
   Mission Statement of the Chorus .................................................................................................................... 7  
   Rehearsal ...................................................................................................................................................... 8  
   Recruitment and Members .............................................................................................................................. 9  
   Performance ............................................................................................................................................... 10  
   Repertoire .................................................................................................................................................. 12  
   Expected Challenges .................................................................................................................................. 15  

3. **Approach to Research** ............................................................................................................................... 17  
   Action Research .......................................................................................................................................... 17  
   Structure of this Paper ................................................................................................................................. 17  

4. **Vocal Technique** ...................................................................................................................................... 19  
   Introduction .................................................................................................................................................. 19  
   Observation: Breath Support, Engagement, and Control .............................................................................. 20  
   Observation: Informal, Unmatched Vowels ..................................................................................................... 23  
   Observation: Singing Under Pitch ................................................................................................................ 27  

5. **Musicianship Training** ............................................................................................................................... 34  
   Introduction .................................................................................................................................................. 34  
   Observation: Trouble Maintaining Tempo during Sight-reading Exercises .................................................... 38  
   Observation: Improvement in Sight-reading Ability Limited to Some Students ........................................... 42  
   Observation: Some Blending and Tuning Issues Due to Lack of Aural Awareness ........................................ 43  

6. **Conducting** .............................................................................................................................................. 50  
   Introduction .................................................................................................................................................. 50  
   Observation: Unclear Where the Ictus Falls .................................................................................................... 51  
   Observation: Losing Attention, Especially During Theory Explanations .................................................... 52  
   Author’s Note: Teaching by Analogy ........................................................................................................... 53  
   Other Lessons Learned ............................................................................................................................... 53  
   Case Study: “Sally Gardens” ....................................................................................................................... 55  

7. **Participation Dynamics** ............................................................................................................................. 61  
   Bonding ....................................................................................................................................................... 61  
   Commitment .................................................................................................................................................. 62  

8. **Overall Reflection** ....................................................................................................................................... 64  
   The Many Hats of a Conductor ..................................................................................................................... 64  
   The Choral Experience as the Conductor ...................................................................................................... 65  
   Development of Leadership Skills ............................................................................................................. 66  

Appendix A: Recruitment Materials .................................................................................................................. 69  
Appendix B: Scores .......................................................................................................................................... 71  
Appendix C: Attendance Contract ................................................................................................................... 73  
Bibliography ..................................................................................................................................................... 74  
Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................................................... 76
1. Background

Introduction

At the beginning of every school year, new and returning Wellesley students audition for numerous performing arts organizations on campus. For singers, there are multiple options, including a cappella groups, the Wellesley College Choir, Collegium Musicum, Chamber Singers, and individual voice lessons. Unfortunately, there are many who love to sing in groups, but do not yet have the musical ability to qualify for any of the existing groups inside and outside of the Music Department. After sitting in on the auditions for the Wellesley College Choir at the start of this semester, I determined that there were eligible candidates for a training choir.

Why a Training Choir?

Eligible students for the training choir had a range of musical experience, but did not have the same vocal development and music skills of the returning choir members. All auditionees for the Wellesley College Choir (WCC) were passionate about singing in the choir, but only the ones who were vocally developed and musically prepared to the level of the WCC were asked to join the group. This left a group of about twenty singers that did not have the same vocal development and music skills that the returning members of the choir possessed. Dr. Lisa Graham, D.M.A., Director of Choral Programs at Wellesley College, suggested that many of these singers would benefit from a training choir to help them improve their skills. Historically, a few people who are not asked to join the WCC following their first audition return to audition again, but the majority of people who are not immediately asked to join the group find a home in another organization and do not return to future choir auditions. A training choir
would provide an avenue through which dedicated choral learners could improve their skills and be motivated to audition again, with significant preparation for that second audition.

**Previous Beginning Choir Models**

In the past, the Music Department has run a training choir under the title “Wellesley College Glee Club,” directed by Dr. Graham. This was a beginning-level group open to all those who wanted to join, regardless of experience or ability. At the time this choir was running, Dr. Graham was also conducting two other groups, both of which were more advanced than the Glee Club. The Glee Club performed on the same concert as those other two groups, and members were very aware of their status as the least advanced of the three ensembles. By nature of sharing the same conductor and performing consecutively, the comparison to other groups made it hard to maintain morale within the Glee Club. Eventually, when Dr. Graham founded the Choral Scholars program, she and the department jointly decided to focus efforts elsewhere and the Glee Club dissolved.

At a different time in the choral program’s history, Dr. Graham ran a “just-for-fun” singing ensemble that met weekly for an hour during community time. This choir was not intended to improve the skills of singers, but rather to provide a low-commitment avenue through which people could enjoy singing with a group. They performed informally on campus, often in outdoor spaces. This choir filled the need for a non-auditioned group that was inclusive of everyone who felt their lives would be better with a little more singing, regardless of their level of formal training.

The history, benefits, and drawbacks of these predecessors helped form the three-part mission of the Preparatory Chorus. They also influenced many early decisions about the groups’ logistics, and their legacy lives on through some of the repertoire we sing.
My Background

I developed an interest in choral singing in my early teens, and came to Wellesley excited to continue to sing in a choral environment. I joined the Wellesley College Choir, the Chamber Singers, and eagerly added Choral Scholars to my activities during my first semester. My decision to join the Choral Scholars program was motivated by my long-standing love for choral music and choral singing. During the first semester, we focused on conducting. This was my first experience with conducting, and I really enjoyed it. My continued participation in the two singing groups, augmented by the academic study of music from the scholars program, led to my decision to take the conducting class as a sophomore. I gained the most formal training of any of my past or present conducting opportunities in this setting, and spent the following year practicing and improving upon what I learned. During this next year, I studied privately with Dr. Graham for the first semester, and acted as the Assistant Conductor to the choir through the year. At the beginning of this year, when an opportunity arose to lead my own group, I was excited about another way to develop my skills, and to be involved with an art that I have come to love so much.

Mutually Beneficial Formation of the Group

While the chorus was formed for the musical and social benefit of the singers, I too am learning from the experience. I have seen incredible improvement in both the singers and in myself. The singers have come together as individuals and formed a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. They have made impressive progress in vocal development, are now more trained musicians than they previously were, and are armed with listening and sight-reading skills. I have discovered a love for teaching, specifically in this field that is very close to my heart, and have improved my ability to speak and learn in front of a group. It has been rewarding
to help choir members develop skills that they can use now and in the future to express
themselves. I discuss an evaluation of my own efforts in Conducting (Chapter 6).

After the group had run for a few weeks, and the possibility of a successful year had
become apparent, I began to have big dreams for the chorus, including a continuation of the
group as a departmental ensemble in future years. While there is not a candidate for a conductor
next year, such that the group could actually continue, I maintain my hope that the group will
reappear when there is interest as well as potential growth and learning for both singers and
conductor.
2. Setting up a Choir

Introduction

In a chapter about planning and structuring rehearsal, Brian Busch bluntly begins by saying, “Two major functions will be pertinent to your role as conductor: organizing and teaching. Your success as a conductor will be based on your competence to perform these two functions” (239). When faced with the task of setting up a choir, I was a bit overwhelmed by the prospect of making all of the organizational decisions that turned an idea into an actual singing group. Once I had formulated a purpose for singing, a means of recruiting singers, and the logistics of a time and place to rehearse, I needed to work out more of the details of how to seat singers, prepare for concerts, and of course, make a plan to help the members of the group become better singers. Keeping in mind my purpose of achieving the three goals outlined below helped bring direction to the organizational and musical preparation that went into forming the chorus.

Mission Statement of the Chorus

The mission statement was formed by using models of prior beginning choirs, motivated by the initial idea behind the group: something mutually beneficial for myself as a conductor and for students as beginning singers. Because of the history of unsuccessful WCC auditionees not returning to re-audition, I gathered that there were people on campus who had a love for singing, but were not able to participate in the on-campus groups. The positive reception of the group at the Student Organizations Fair was evidence that the student body agrees that a non-audition singing group would be an asset to campus life. Thirty-six people signed up for more information at the fair, and many others who did not sign up commented that it was a good idea.

The mission statement of the Wellesley Preparatory Chorus (WPC) is as follows:
1. Provide a vocal ensemble opportunity for those with undeveloped musical ability or scheduling conflicts with other singing groups.

2. Teach basic vocal technique, sight-reading, and ear training to prepare members to sing with more advanced groups on campus, particularly the Wellesley College Choir.

3. Serve the Greater Boston community and foster community within our group through performances at local nursing homes, hospitals, etc.

People sing for a myriad of reasons, but often a simple love of singing is what drives their desire to make time to sing while at school. Performance provides an opportunity to enjoy this love of music through sharing it, as well as to bring the gift of music particularly to those who have limited ability to seek it out for themselves, and can be an inspiring and uplifting experience for both choir and audience. One of the reasons I have chosen to sing in choirs, rather than as a solo singer, is the sense of community that I have experienced in choral environments through my life, both within the choir and in its connection with the broader community. I strove to foster both kinds of community relationships within this group.

**Rehearsal**

One of the most difficult aspects of setting up this group was figuring out the details of rehearsal. I wanted to ensure that we had sufficient time to make significant progress without demanding so much of the singers that interested parties would be hesitant to join. After much thought and consultation with Dr. Graham, I decided that two one-hour rehearsals a week would provide the optimum balance of opportunity for progress and level of dedication. This would require a fair amount of time and energy, and therefore a significant commitment, from the singers and me. The required rehearsal time is still less than that of the Wellesley College Choir though, and leaves enough space for members to participate in other campus activities. On a
survey that I gave midway through the fall semester, one student responded that her favorite aspect of the group was the level of commitment because it did not take up too much of her time.

**Recruitment and Members**

In accordance with the first goal of the mission statement, I initially reached out to the people who were not invited to join the WCC. I also reached out to the three most visible a cappella groups on campus, and was able to pass on information about the WPC to their auditionees. Near the beginning of the school year, I attended the Student Organizations Fair. At this event, all of the student clubs claim their small part of a table on Severance Green and try to entice people, mostly first-year students, to sign up for their group. I was stationed in the Performing Arts area, but could only grab a space between Wushu and the Wellesley Circus. Despite my obscure location, I ended the afternoon with thirty-six names on the sign-up sheet, and high hopes that I would end up with at least a small ensemble.

There were fifteen attendees at the first meeting, and a few more who came and went as news spread about the chorus and schedules solidified. Following the coming and going of people those next few weeks, I ended with a group of twelve committed singers. Ten of these were first-year students, and the other two were exchange students. These women were all new to Wellesley. This particular aspect of the group influenced the development of community between singers, which is explored more thoroughly in Participation Dynamics: Bonding (Chapter 7). A number of chorus members commented to me throughout the fall semester, either in person or on the survey, that they really like singing in such a small group. None specified why, exactly, but I imagine that because small classes draw people to Wellesley, students here prefer small environments where they get more individual attention, and know their classmates
and teacher by name. Most of these twelve had some musical experience in the past, either through piano lessons, middle school band, or even in high school choir.

Another challenging aspect of planning rehearsal was finding a place to meet. I selected rehearsal times based on Wellesley’s “community time,” a time twice a week when there aren’t any classes, to decrease the probability that interested singers would have scheduling conflicts. Unfortunately, Wellesley’s music building rehearsal spaces are in high demand, and there were no spaces available during our rehearsal time. With patience and creativity, I was able to secure a place in the chapel for the majority of our rehearsals. Through this part of the planning process, I learned the value of working with flexible people, and the importance of not giving up when all available options appear to be exhausted.

After the first semester, a few choir members returned to their home country after finishing their study abroad semester at Wellesley, or were unable to continue with the chorus for other reasons. I again reached out to the a cappella groups for specific people to invite, and posted paper flyers around campus (see Appendix A: Recruitment Materials). Twenty-eight people came to the first open rehearsal of the spring semester, and, after a few weeks, ten committed to staying for the semester. Unfortunately, one of those was not able to continue, and the semester’s final count was nine singers.

**Performance**

Performance is a key aspect of a choral group, because it is a way to demonstrate what has been worked on for months, and allows performers to share music with audience members. Performance also helps choir members develop confidence, and provides an authentic end for which to rehearse and prepare. Such preparation, intended for performance, “is perhaps the key
element of confidence” (Cleland and Dobra-Grindahl, 375) and was therefore essential to our group.

Because there are so many musical performing arts groups at Wellesley, I anticipated difficulty in gathering a reasonably sized audience for such a new group. We performed at a retirement center near campus, Waterstone at Wellesley, at the end of both the fall and spring semesters. This venue guaranteed us a supportive audience and helped us fulfill our goal to invite the community to participate in our music making. The center’s residents were very encouraging and complimentary, and the large audience and warm reception by our guests seemed to have a great positive impact on the singers.

Before finding this prime location, I called many retirement homes, hospitals, and homeless shelters in the Metro West area. I was pleased to come across Waterstone, especially because a choir member’s grandmother worked there and was excited to be able to share her granddaughter’s gift with her colleagues and the residents under her care. While it was beneficial that I found a venue so close to campus, and one that had a piano and a willing audience, we still had the issue of getting all of the singers, instrumentalists, myself, and Dr. Graham to the center. When I began the group, I expected that the biggest cost we would incur was that of transportation, and in retrospect, that was definitely correct. I wrote a funding proposal to the Music Department outlining our potential expenditures at the beginning of the year, and secured funding for transportation and a few other activities and supplies well before the time came to actually schedule the performance. Because the chorus was using the performance as a service opportunity, the college’s Center for Work and Service (CWS) offered us the use of their vans, which meant that we had a way to get to and from the concert without the use of department funds. I coordinated the availability of the singers, the vans, and Waterstone, and we picked a
date for the performances. Another singer and I went through the CWS driver training and screening process, and transported the group to the venue.

The fall concert was an excellent success, and the spring one has the potential to be even better. To show the campus community what we have been working on all year, we will have an open rehearsal and informal performance on campus this spring, along with our second visit to Waterstone. Both performances will take place after the submission of this thesis, so reviews of those performances are not included.

**Repertoire**

Choosing repertoire that was both interesting and appropriate for the group was challenging, since I had not taken a choral literature class nor had had explicit instruction on how to choose pieces. Theron Kirk cites the search for appropriate repertoire as “one of the most difficult jobs any choral director has and one of the most time consuming” (52). However, the choral library offered a wealth of music from which to choose, and Dr. Graham pointed me in the right direction by suggesting pieces that the previous training choir had sung. She also suggested that I evaluate pieces by looking at the number of parts, selecting a variety of genres and tempi, and choosing natural melodies. Along with Dr. Graham’s suggestions and my own experience, I took into account programming interest, a balance of academic pieces and those that are fun to sing, and some that I was sure would generate immediate interest (Diercks, 50). I drew on my previous experience singing in women’s choirs and pieces I had learned in conducting class, together with the repertoire from the choral library, to compile the list of pieces used (see Appendix B: Scores for bibliographic information).
**Sally Gardens**

I learned “Sally Gardens” as a Choral Scholar, a program that focused on the academic aspects of choral music. I learned basic conducting patterns, and this was one of the first pieces that I practiced leading with the small group of other scholars as singers. The piece is sung completely in unison, and therefore allowed for a focus on tone quality and phrasing. It is fairly easy to learn initially, but provides ample opportunity for working on the expressive details in the score.

**Zum Gali and Gaudeamus**

These two rounds opened our first and second semester, respectively, as they were quick to learn but musically interesting to explore. Rounds are ideal for developing groups since they can be learned all together, yet choir members still develop their listening and musicianship skills through practicing in parts.

**Messe Basse**

I chose two movements from Fauré’s *Messe Basse*: “Kyrie eleison” and “Agnus Dei.” Each of these provides an opportunity to sing canonic choral music at an attainable, yet challenging, level. These two pieces were the most advanced that we studied, and it was rewarding for both the singers and myself to be able to tackle such complex, beautiful music.

**Siyahamba**

I learned “Siyahamba” in one of the first choirs that I ever sang in, and was very excited to introduce this upbeat piece to the chorus. While we used solfège and other tedious skill-building methods to learn most other pieces, I taught “Siyahamba” completely by ear. Because the piece comes from an oral South African tradition, I could help the singers rely on listening, rather than what they saw on the page, to sing together.
**Gabi Gabi**

This was another African praise song that I introduced during the first semester when the group was larger. There were enough members then that there were three people on each of the four parts. Learning a polyphonic piece was exciting for the singers, and good practice in hearing one voice among many. The high-energy nature of the work gave contrast to our fall set.

**Ah, Robyn!**

“Ah, Robyn!” has a tuneful melody that travels through all three of the voice parts. Following the melody and patterned harmony helped singers develop aurally. The repetition of multiple parts aided the learning process, and provided a platform upon which to learn and discuss how dynamics and phrasing can keep repetition interesting for singers and audience.

**Circle ‘Round for Freedom**

I was introduced to this hymn by the Wellesley College Choir, and loved the message of solidarity and unity that it promotes. The hymn is written in three parts, with the melody in the middle voice throughout. This unusual voicing allowed the second sopranos to shine, while giving the first sopranos practice singing harmony without covering the melody. Because “Circle ‘Round” is a hymn, there are multiple sustained cadences, which make it great for practicing tuning.

**Angelus ad Virginem**

This Christmas piece rounded out the formal set of our winter performance at Waterstone. The antiphonal setting of the narrative lent itself to whole-group singing alternating with singing by smaller ensembles. Preparing for performance in small groups was new and rewarding for the singers.
Expected Challenges

While every group of developing singers brings its own unique set of personalities, natural abilities, and areas in need of improvement, there are a few challenges that are nearly universal to all beginning singers. Even if they have previous musical experience with a different instrument, beginning singers tend to need the most improvement in posture, breath support, and tone quality, due to a lack of singing experience and instruction. Posture and breath support directly influence the vocal instrument itself, so targeted instruction and practice in these areas can lead to notable improvement in tone quality (McKinney, 25). An examination of why the basics of these skills are needed for beginners helps us understand how best to foster their improvement.

A resonant, full tone is influenced by many factors, but can be inhibited significantly by faults in two major areas: posture and breath support. The vocal instrument is made of an actuator, vibrator, and resonator, just like many Western string instruments. Without the proper alignment of these parts—posture—the instrument cannot function optimally. Many inexperienced singers have never had instruction in posture, and may have developed bad habits that further exacerbate the issue. Practicing good posture while standing up, sitting down, and even in everyday life outside of rehearsal can quickly make significant changes in postural habits, thereby eliminating excess tension that can affect the voice.

Breath functions as the vocal instrument’s actuator, which moves the vocal chords, or the vibrator. The sound then travels into the mouth and head (the resonator) and enters our ears. Therefore, learning to control the breath and use it efficiently is an important aspect of quality singing. Many new singers have not paid much attention to how they breathe, and may already have habits of shallow breathing, or may be new to the concept of trying to control breathing in
intentional ways. New singers will probably need practice with abdominal breathing, which can be challenging both to learn and to teach.

Tone quality is influenced by both posture and breath support, but also comes from the space within the mouth, position of the tongue, and shape of the lips. Similar to learning new techniques of everyday activities, such as posture and breathing, developing singers may not naturally create the space within their mouths or shape their lips such that they can immediately produce a beautiful tone. The tendency for untrained singers is to sing with spread vowels, and the sound may be overly bright, pushed, or nasal. To combat these challenges, James McKinney writes that the conductor lead the singers in overdoing the mistake such that it becomes obvious, and having the singers practice modifying their sound from the clearly unpleasant toward a more resonant and formal tone.

As time goes on, listening abilities will improve, which will aid singers’ development in breath support and tone quality. A singer needs to be able to discriminate between sounds and decide which is superior so that she can work towards using posture, breath, and tone to achieve the sound she desires. General confidence will also improve over time. Cleland and Dobrea-Grindahl suggest that, “confidence occurs when preparation, experience, vision, passion, and communication come together” (375). As chorus members develop even in the most challenging of areas, prepare for performance, and find meaning in the music they sing, they will also become more confident singers.
3. Approach to Research

Action Research

Action research is used by practitioners in many different fields as a way of evaluating and improving their practice. I was first introduced to the concept of action research through an education course at Wellesley. I determined that it would apply to this project, because it provided a way of measuring and keeping track of my interactions and progress with singers. According to the journal *Educational Action Research*, “over the past quarter century, [action research] has become much more widely accepted as an effective teaching, learning, and research practice” (82). The research cycle includes observation, action, reflection, and then repeated actions and reflections until the reason for the observation has been discovered. The following chapters will be modeled after this cycle of action research, with the observations categorized by topic.

This process has been applied in musical settings as evidenced by the three-step “Plan of Action” outlined in *Vocal Faults* (17). This plan is to first recognize symptoms, then determine causes, then devise cures for various kinds of vocal faults. This system is similar to that of action research, specifically applied to a musical education setting. As further testimony of this process’ applicability to music, a dissertation by Susan Knight uses a “collaborative reflective action process” specifically targeted at beginning singers (“Diagnosis and Remediation,” 1). While I synthesized the ideas of helping beginning singers with using action research before discovering this dissertation, it further credits the viability of my approach to this project.

Structure of this Paper

The next three chapters, Vocal Technique, Musicianship Training, and Conducting, follow the sequence outlined above: observation, reflection, then action. These chapters were
chosen based on the basic tenets of choral technique. I gathered my data by watching the rehearsal videos, comparing my notes and outlines to what occurred in rehearsal, analyzing surveys of chorus members, and consulting with Dr. Graham about her observations and suggestions. Following Conducting (Chapter 6), the subsequent sections no longer follow the research pattern, and are meant to be a continuation of the description of other aspects of the project.
4. Vocal Technique

Introduction

Following the auditions for the Wellesley College Choir, Dr. Graham identified the two most prominent factors that separated auditionees who were invited to join from those who were not. These factors were vocal technique and musicianship skills. While the Preparatory Chorus only included a few people who had actually auditioned for the choir, I assumed that other beginning singers with little experience might exhibit a need for improvement in some of the same areas. Even elementary instruction in technique can prevent habits that lead to vocal fatigue and a swallowed sound, by helping singers eliminate excess tension in their bodies (Naseth, 103). Basic vocal technique not only brings maturity to the overall sound quality of a vocal ensemble, but is also a foundational skill needed to practice more advanced techniques such as tuning and a sense of line.

Learning how to aid singers’ progress in this aspect of choral singing has been a significant challenge for me for a number of reasons. I attribute part of the difficulty to the fact that I am aiming to help singers as individuals within a group setting. The other major part of the difficulty is my own experience progressing in vocal technique. Because I grew up playing the piano, by the time I started choir in the sixth-grade I was already adept at reading music. Learning sight-reading, for example, was something that I picked up quickly because, while I was learning the language and system of solfège, my prior musical training had prepared me well for developing this new skill. Many aspects of vocal technique, however, were new and did not come naturally. My progress in this area was very gradual, because I had difficulty identifying which exercises worked for me and which were not as successful. Because I did not have a solid understanding of how I learned to sing, it was difficult for me to identify which practices would
help the singers progress based on what I heard. I have improved in this area through my three years of voice lessons at Wellesley, as I have learned how my voice teacher explains concepts to me and promotes my own vocal development. Through an engagement with multiple texts and consultations with Dr. Graham, I was able to overcome these difficulties and improve my own practice, as well as that of the group. The subsequent sections will discuss how I implemented these ideals of vocal technique, and evaluated the singers’ progress in this area as a metric to identify successful actions.

**Observation: Breath Support, Engagement, and Control**

In the first weeks of rehearsal, I noticed a breathy tone from the group as a whole and from particular individuals. This was especially noticeable during warm-ups once the structure of rehearsal became routine. The sound was substantially more disengaged during warm-ups, and especially during the first yawn-sigh, than it was when we were working on pieces. Once the singers had become accustomed to starting rehearsal with the yawn-sigh, they began to perform it with insufficient energy and a breathy tone. This issue was not isolated to warm-ups, but was highlighted then because of the routine of using that exercise at the beginning of each rehearsal. While singing solfège for warm-ups, vowels were spread, the singers continued to sing under-pitch particularly when singing in unison, and there was no focus to the sound.

While multiple underlying causes could have led to these results, I first attributed these specific difficulties to a lack of air. Singers were not consistently taking in low breaths, and, even when they were, they were not controlling the exhalation of that air. One of the classification methods suggested in *Vocal Faults* focuses on physical processes. McKinney names four categories of faults when classified in this way: faults related to respiration, phonation, resonance, and articulation (17). In this case, this was an issue of respiration. The three most
important aspects of breath support are correct posture, correct intake of breath, and suspension of breath (53). I was having trouble helping the singers achieve the correct intake of breath.

**Action: Physical Activities**

I asked the singers to place their hands on their ribcages and feel their hands expand as they took a breath. We did this exercise for the first time the second week of rehearsal and I referenced it often in subsequent rehearsals in my attempts to help connect the breathing exercise with the practical application of singing. As we repeated this exercise in later rehearsals, often supplemented with comments on resonance and support, the singers were able to engage more fully in the activity. I saw more visible abdominal expansion, which I expected would lead to a more supported sound, but I did not notice a significant difference in the sound. I found, over time, that the physical activities engaged singers in rehearsal with their bodies as well as with their attention. Even though I did not initially notice a more supported sound, I continued to encourage the singers to use physical gestures as models. Most of the time, the singers would not do the physical motion if it was optional. However, if I requested their participation, they would comply and at least be more engaged even if the activity did not have the desired result.

**Action: Engaging Abdominal Muscles**

Along with the physical breathing exercise, I added two other breathing exercises specifically aimed at engaging the middle of the body with the breath. First, I asked the singers to pant at differing speeds as if they were imitating large and small dogs. This brought a light-hearted spirit to our warm-ups, but, more importantly, was a more natural way to engage with the breath. Again, I saw abdominals visibly moving as we did this exercise a few more times in later rehearsals, but did not notice a significant difference in the sound.
The second exercise involved simply taking a deep breath and letting out the air slowly on a hiss, pulsing the air as guided by my gesture. When we first started doing these exercises, I noticed students pulsing the beat with their bodies by nodding their heads, or leaning slightly forward to the beat, rather than only pulsing air. As we continued, though, students demonstrated the pulse less on other parts of their bodies and were able to sustain the hiss for a longer period of time. Some singers in particular have really improved in their ability to control exhalation.

Reflection: Breathing Exercises

While using a rotation of these three breathing activities over the first six weeks of rehearsal, I heard incremental improvement in the sound quality due to improved breath support. I cannot attribute the success to a single exercise, Dr. Graham helped me recognize one possible hindrance to further success with these breathing exercises. As I was facilitating each of these breathing exercises, I talked about the importance of taking a deep breath by frequently using the phrase, “fill with air.” Dr. Graham pointed out that this image was causing people to “fill,” as in from top to bottom, rather than from side to side. This caused an over-inhalation that relied too heavily on the chest portion of the body, such that when singers began to release air, there was an over-exhalation at the beginning, rather than a controlled release of breath. While I had not noticed the particular sound of rushed exhalation at the beginning during our rehearsal, I was able to hear it on the recording once I knew to look for it. The rush of air at the beginning of the breath sometimes led to a pushed sound, or sometimes a very breathy tone, this time from too much air at once, rather than not enough. Following the discussion with Dr. Graham, I did as she suggested and stopped using the phrase “fill with air,” and instead aimed my focus on taking a low breath and being efficient with the air by bringing point to the sound.
**Action: Alternative Representations of Correct Breathing**

During the next rehearsal, I asked singers to imagine they were wearing a belt around their waist made entirely of noses. They were to take in their breath from the waist through the noses. In the same warm-up sequence, I asked them to use their hand as they sang a sequence of Sol-Do’- Sol- Mi-Do ascending and then descending by half steps. Their hands represented lifting the sound, and a continuous flow of air, by rising above the head and then descending smoothly in front of the singer as she sang the descending triad. I soon added a pointed index finger to the same physical and vocal exercise, asking them to use their voice to hypothetically cut through the middle of the stained glass window behind me in the chapel.

**Reflection: Alternative Breathing Exercises**

This immediately brought more core to the sound, and the breath intake became connected to the subsequent singing. I continued to use the pointed finger and sound aimed at a particular location, as well as isolating the nose belt breathing exercise to evaluate its success as separate from the pointed finger exercise. Another effect of this exercise was that the singers naturally produced more formal vowels. The vowels were of a similar formality to the previous weeks’ rehearsal, but I would often either verbally address making taller vowels or show that message as I was leading the warm-up. Without any verbal or non-verbal reminder, the vowels were sufficiently formal. This speaks to the inter-relatedness of breath support and formal vowels as aspects of quality vocal technique.

**Observation: Informal, Unmatched Vowels**

Early in our first semester of rehearsal, I identified an issue of blend and immediately attributed it to vowel shape. While many factors influence blend, unmatched vowels are a
common cause of disparate blend. Drawing attention to the vowel shape can cause an immediate improvement in sectional and overall blend.

**Action: Addressing Vowels Directly**

I began by directly addressing the issue of unmatched, informal vowels with the group. I used verbal reminders about what the mouth should look and feel like when it is shaping formal vowels. I suggested that the mouth form a square, the jaw be relaxed and open, and the roundness of the mouth and volume of the sound adjusted to match the surrounding singers. I also used physical reminders by silently moving my hands down the cheeks of my own face to represent an open, relaxed vowel. While modeling the action myself, I had the singers bend their wrists to a ninety-degree angle, then place the backs of their hands against their cheeks to reinforce the idea that the jaw has relaxed and the lip shape was tall. As I continued to use these methods to remind singers about vowel shape, I also described the sound that I was hearing as if I were an audience member. I explained that the sound within the group differs from what I hear, standing in front of the group, and is even more far removed from what is heard in the audience. Within the context of crisp consonants and text communication, we again returned to this idea that the sound will be different to the singers than it will be to the audience.

**Reflection: Improved Formality of Vowels Over Time**

The actions described above had a sustained, positive effect on the formality and uniformity of the singers’ vowels, thereby improving the blend. I was surprised at how much time it took for these repetitive actions to yield a blended sound that was pleasing to the ear. Progress was slow, but there was consistent improvement and the group sound matured relative to where it was when we began the process. I was pleased with the continual improvement of the formality of the sound through vowel shape, and I have learned that at least part of this is a skill
that develops over time, as singers develop their ear and an awareness of their own singing instrument.

**Action: Dial of Brightening and Darkening Vowels**

To help singers hear the difference that vowels can make in the maturity and uniformity of sound, I wanted to expose them to both extremes of vowel color: very bright and very dark. I asked them to imagine that they were young girls, and the singers naturally chose a spread vowel with bright tone to represent a young, untrained singer. I also had them experiment with dark, covered vowels by imitating the voices of older women and opera singers. To further emphasize the degree to which vowel shape influences the maturity and pleasantness of the tone, I had the singers follow my gesture miming turning a knob that moved the sound along a spectrum from a bright sound to a covered one. Along with the comic relief brought by twelve singers experimenting with extremes of unpleasant, unnatural sound, the singers were able to make connections between what they felt their face and mouths doing and where their vowel fell on the “vowel spectrum.”

**Reflection: Developing Physical and Visual Awareness**

During these attempts to improve blend, I noticed how difficult it was to develop an awareness of the relationship between physical sensation and appearance. This awareness is constantly evolving and developing. Because of my substantial singing experience, I can now visualize my mouth when I am exhibiting formal vowels and my face when I look engaged in the music. However, I have not been conducting nearly as long as I have been singing and am often surprised, when I watch myself on videotape, by the appearance of my motions. I imagine it is much the same for developing singers. I have noticed that in response to my actions aimed at creating uniformity and encouraging tall vowels, some singers overcompensate by squeezing the
lips in around the teeth or pushing the lips very forward in an awkward manner. I spoke to these individuals directly, encouraged them to relax their faces, and thanked them for their apparent efforts to do what I was asking of them. I suggested to all the singers that they spend a few minutes making faces in front of the mirror, to help them make a visual connection with what they feel physically when altering vowels in different ways. These instances of overcompensation confirmed the fact that it was not for lack of trying that the vowels were not blending. I have learned that some people are naturally gifted at making the physical-to-visual connection, but any kind of progression in this awareness takes a lot of practice. Given that this would take a long time to fix, I decided to keep working at it, while shifting my focus to making sure that the singers could hear the variance in the sound caused by a lack of blend.

**Action: Hearing Lack of Blend Due to Vowel Shape**

By this point in the year, it had become routine that different groups of students would listen to each other sing during rehearsal and warm ups. It was my hope that this would help them develop their ears, as well as develop a vocabulary with which to discuss sound. I prompted students to either compliment others’ vowel matching and blend or suggest improvements specifically regarding those elements. Through my solicitation of these targeted comments, I was hoping students would correctly identify level of blend.

**Reflection: Diagnosing Other Factors that Affect Blend**

The singers listened to each other and oriented their comments specifically toward blend. Unfortunately, that day and in later evaluations of each other, multiple students would incorrectly comment on the “excellent blend” when the vowels disagreed even more than usual. Although this comment introduced me to the danger of asking novices for their input, I took this response as a diagnosis of the current situation and used it to inform my research. I had
previously been focusing on adapting physical and visual structures, but those were only able to have marginal effect because the singers were not hearing the difference in blend. When planning the overall structure and focus of this group, I chose to focus on vocal production and aspects of musicianship that did not include specific development of the ear. While our pitch at this point would not be sure enough to do many tuning exercises, I ultimately realized the importance of working to develop the ear. I realized that allowing for growth in ear training was an essential part of being successful at the very basics of choral singing. With this discovery, I continued with actions to aid aural development. These are discussed in Musicianship Training (Chapter 5).

**Observation: Singing Under Pitch**

Over time, I noticed that the singers were frequently low to the pitch when singing in unison. Pitch was especially low while singing descending lines as part of warm-ups. The singers were making the descending step-wise intervals slightly larger than they needed to be, so each subsequent note was lower than the target pitch.

**Action: Physical Adjustments**

To address this issue, I helped the singers first to correctly align their singing instrument through improving posture, and then to physically represent staying on top of the pitch. I reminded them that the vocal instrument is like any other, in that all of its parts need be aligned correctly to produce the best quality of sound. Regarding posture, I specifically instructed that feet should be flat on the floor, shoulder-width apart, with one foot slightly in front of the other to create a firm base (McKinney, 48). Chest should be erect with the shoulders back with the hips straight (49). This position allows the spine to take the weight of the body instead of relying on the muscles (which is what happens when a hip is cocked), thereby eliminating unnecessary
tension and potential for fatigue from the body. Finally, the head rests on top of the spine with the throat open and unrestricted. In the sitting position, the feet are on the floor and the back is not resting on the chair but forms a ninety-degree angle with the legs. This sitting position ensures that the breathing mechanism is properly aligned, and that slouching does not cripple the instrument by inhibiting adequate optimization of inhalation and exhalation. Chorus members were introduced to correct singing posture during one of our first rehearsals, but a short, detailed, review of correct posture was done to specifically help remedy the issue of pitch.

Following this review of correct posture, I suggested some physical representations of staying “on the high side” of the pitch. The first was raising the eyebrows, which heightens awareness of the pitch. As another way to help singers raise their soft palette, I ask them to yawn during warm-ups and feel the space in their mouth changing as they did so. Almost every rehearsal began with some kind of yawn sigh or siren, and the singers used their hands while they vocalized, as a symbol of the continuous air flow and easy transition in and out of the break as the soft palette is lifted. I modeled lift in my face and cheekbones during the yawn sigh that is intend to suggest an energized sound. Sound that is “energized” comes from controlled breath management such that the majority of the air expelled is used to produce sound; it is the opposite of a “breathy” tone that comes from inefficient exhalation. In my conducting gesture both during warm ups and (as necessary) during pieces, I cupped my hand with the palm facing down near my own head as a gentle reminder to think of creating lift and space in the mouth and head. Lastly, in a particularly difficult situation where nothing else seemed to make a difference, I asked singers to gradually stand up onto their tiptoes while singing a descending line. This was an obvious representation of “thinking up while singing down.”
Reflection: Only a Quick Fix

While physical modifications helped the singers stay in tune, this tuning was only maintained for a few iterations of the warm up before the pitch was again too low. Similar to the issue with vowel shape, the singers were only able to make slight progress because they were not hearing whether or not they were singing in tune. We needed a more energized sound overall, with the breath flow moving more quickly through the instrument and the inside of the mouth maintaining a constant open space where the sound could resonate.

Action: Increasing Vocal Energy

As singers increase their engagement with sound and connect the sound to their breath, they are more able to stay on pitch. To keep warm-ups from being monotonous and therefore lacking in energy, I asked singers to model different affects with their humming. Affekt is a German word used by musicians to signify the composite musical aesthetic created by a combination of dynamics, mood, diction, and phrasing. I suggested that they hum as if they had just heard something interesting, as if they were confused, as if they just smelled something really delicious, as if they were agreeing with someone, and so forth. Along with helping the singers to engage with the pitch, this particular exercise allowed them to sing to each other and experiment with different affekts that a piece might necessitate.

I also once asked the singers to sing the familiar tune of “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.” Because everyone knew exactly what the tune should sound like and were more likely to hear any tuning detail that was not correct, they stayed exactly on pitch through this whole song. I was pleased to see that they were definitely capable of singing in tune, although this particular experiment did not seem to have any immediately obvious enduring effect on the tuning of other pieces and warm-ups that we worked on afterwards. Moving forward, however, I returned to the
action of using a familiar tune to combat flatness, and it was often very useful in helping the
singers stay on pitch on days when tuning was particularly challenging.

**Reflection: Not Hearing When We Are On or Off Pitch**

Having come to the conclusion that the group’s difficulty with vowel shape and lack of
blend were symptoms of a lack of aural skills, I wondered if they might also have difficulty
hearing and identifying moments when they were under the pitch. Increasing the vocal energy
led to more engaged faces, which would have been more pleasing to an audience, but the sound
itself returned to being flat after only a couple of iterations of a warm-up with descending line or
a run-through of a familiar tune. Again, I learned the importance of refining aural skills even
when building the foundations of choral singing. I remembered the difficulty I had (and
sometimes continue to have) with hearing minute tuning issues, and also remembered that I
learned this skill by repeatedly hearing the voice or instrument that was singing off pitch
followed immediately by the standard, usually the piano. This personal experience informed my
next action.

**Action: Extra Support from the Accompanist**

Since one of the most obvious places that the singers had difficulty staying in tune was
during warm-ups while singing descending lines, I worked with the accompanist to address this
issue first. To help the students have a point of reference against which to measure their pitch, I
asked the accompanist to play each note the chorus was singing along with the chords she
usually gave. I was hoping that her reinforcement of each pitch, within the key establishment
given by the chord, would help the singers more easily measure their own pitch against that of
the piano.
As we continued to work on pieces that we sang a cappella, I also called on the accompanist for extra support. Regardless of whether she was already shadowing the singers’ pitches for rehearsal purposes, if we came to a cadence that was particularly out of tune, I stopped the singers completely and had them listen to the piano. The accompanist would play the correct pitches. I would then ask the singers to think the pitch, direct them to sing again, and, after a second, the tuning would usually lock into place. There are differing views regarding using the piano to improve pitch, and my next action attacks the issue from another perspective of not using the piano to aid in tuning practice.

**Action: Tuning-Focused Listening Exercises**

While the piano is a helpful and convenient tool for checking tuning, it is ultimately more important that the singers be in tune with each other than with the piano. Because of the even-tempered nature of the piano, vocal tuning is inherently different from that of the piano, and many directors consider it best to make singers’ ears accustomed to hearing tuning within the chorus (Cleland and Dobrea-Grindahl, 32).

I separated the choir into three different parts and built a major triad to begin the first tuning exercise. The singers then practiced moving up and down by half steps with all three parts in similar motion. Maintaining a major triad in a new key was challenging, and I frequently called upon the accompanist to set the singers back on track, and directed the singers to think the pitch, and then sing. Once the singers had become more comfortable with the half step interval and manipulating chords between keys, they were ready for the next tuning exercise. Similar to a tuning warm up used with the Wellesley College Choir, I had the altos begin by singing the root of the chord, then the first sopranos entering a fifth above, and finally the second sopranos filling in the third. Because the singers were fluent with solfège (see Musicianship Training:}
Introduction, Chapter 5), I first built the triad using the solfège syllables before changing to a united vowel “ah.” The group proceeded to move through the warm-up, which had the chord reiterated on a number of different words, all of which contain diphthongs. While diphthong practice was not the primary purpose of the warm up at this time, pausing the sound and singing the chord again to account for each new word increased the utility of the warm up for tuning, because the singers were able to practice getting to the tuned chord more quickly with each iteration of the sound. After the repeated triad on words, all of the singers moved up by a half step as we had practiced before, and started over by building another major triad in the new key.

As I directed the singers to focus their efforts and, particularly, their ears, on tuning, I realized that some singers may not have had a firm understanding of what it meant to sing “in tune.” During one of our practices with these tuning warm ups, I paused and explained a bit more about the concept of tuning. None of the singers were familiar with the overtone series, so I gave a brief overview of the physics of the dividing sound waves that create harmonics based on the fundamental. I explained the intervals with which pitches appear above the fundamental, and related that to why the fifth is built at the beginning of the warm up and the third is added later. I concluded simply by saying that when we sang in tune the sound would lock into place and there would be an audible difference. I told the singers that it could be hard to hear those differences while singing within the group, but that it would definitely be noticeable to the audience whether or not the group was in tune.

**Reflection: Building from the Bottom Up**

Through the action research process, I recognized the importance of listening and realized how difficult it could be to both teach and develop listening skills. I noticed that the singers’ lack of blend was making it especially difficult for tuning exercises to be successful. As
a means of improving blend, I directed an individual singer to begin singing a sustained pitch, and then pointed to other singers to join in one-by-one. The end result was a full chorus that truly sounded like one or two singers, which was very encouraging to hear. While this level of blend was not sustained in later rehearsals, the exercise fixed the blend enough for tuning exercises to be worthwhile throughout that rehearsal.

Learning to perceive tuning and the direction of pitch error is a refined aural skill that develops over time. By targeting the chronic, intrinsic issues of under-energized sound or immature, pushed, constrained sound (which can cause sharpness), a conductor can help her group to be consistently more accurate, despite extrinsic factors such as bad weather, exam weeks that cause fatigue, and other sources of inaccurate pitch that are outside of her direct control. A survey given at the end of the semester showed that, despite an increased academic workload and poor weather in November and December, the choir members perceived a greater improvement in their own performance during this time than in September and October.

![Self-Reported Development in Vocal Technique in October and December, 2013](image)

**Figure 1. Choir member improvement in both October and December**
5. Musicianship Training

Introduction

Musicianship training is a key part of becoming a better choral singer, and is one of the foundational elements on which the chorus was founded. A fundamental part of this training involves learning how to read music at sight using the pedagogical tool of solfège. Solfège is a system of syllables used to represent each note of the scale, for which composer, pedagogue, and ethnomusicologist Kodály developed corresponding hand signs. Each hand sign has a particular pedagogical purpose that links the physical symbol to the scale degree it represents. These hand signs are an instructional tool used by beginning singers and music educators all over the world.

Figure 2. Kodály hand signs for the diatonic scale

Once the chorus learned the hand signs, I used McGill and Steven’s *90 Days to Sight-reading Success* to deliver incrementally more challenging sight-reading exercises that strengthened what singers already knew, and built upon the skills they had gained through practice of earlier exercises. The exercises were grouped not only by difficulty, but also by range. This enabled me to choose appropriate exercises for the full group, and modify chosen exercises in individual meetings according to range.
The capacity to confidently read music increases a singer’s ability to learn a piece more quickly than if she were to use the lengthy, repetitive process of learning each phrase by ear. By developing good sight-reading skills, singers are able to anticipate rhythmic figures and intervals, even if they are looking at a piece for the first time. Decker and Kirk cite sight-reading practice as the “foundation for interval recognition,” which I have already seen applied with the group (139). When I relate intervals found within pieces to intervals between solfège syllables, even if those syllables are not those that correspond to the key of the piece, singers are able to sing and remember the interval much more quickly. Creating this link between what is seen and what is sung develops what Cleland and Dobrea-Grindahl call “inner hearing.” This is one of the essential skills taught through the study of solfège. It helps singers “understand the nature, properties, and significance of the musical sounds [they] hear” (83). This “inner hearing” helps singers at all levels critically listen to music, which is fundamental to the creation of beautiful music.

**Challenges**

While practicing sight-reading has its benefits, using it as a tool to develop musicianship has proven challenging as well. The music we sang in preparation for performance was significantly more difficult than the music we sight-read for practice. This is the case with many choirs, because one of the benefits to studying music through choral singing is being challenged enough to improve, which would not necessarily happen if choirs only sang music at the level at which singers could sight-read. Since the music we sang was more difficult, it was a challenge to make the exercises worthwhile (considering they are not excerpts of pieces) and to learn pieces so far above our sight-reading level. However, we combated these challenges over time by using multiple methods to learn pieces—including, but not limited to, sight-reading—allowing singers
to recognize that the sight-reading exercises led to improvement, and appreciate the challenge that our performance music provided.

Another challenge of this model of sight-reading practice came as I tried to build confidence in sight-reading. I led the singers only in group sight-reading during rehearsal, which helped singers feel less afraid to make mistakes. However, it did not necessarily help them build enough confidence to sight-read on their own. In a few instances, I heard singers sight-read as individuals, and while the group sight-reading model seems to have yielded strong individual sight-reading confidence for some, it did not have the same impact on others. Outside of individual meetings, it was hard for me to assess individuals’ sight-reading abilities and progress because I was not able to determine how much they relied on the group for help. However, at its core, the group sight-reading model teaches singers to listen to each other for help, and, although it made assessment difficult, listening to, and adjusting because of, other singers is an essential skill for choral rehearsal and performance.

**Signs of Progress**

As the chorus members grew accustomed to the sight-reading process, I noticed clear improvement from the group. One of the most obvious points of improvement was their ability to use the Kodály hand signs. None of the singers had used hand signs, or even solfège, previous to joining the group. By the end of the year, the group as a whole was fluent in solfège and the accompanying signs. The ease with which they used the hand signs showed that the singers employed them as a sight-reading tool, rather than feeling an additional burden of thought due to the added motion. Sight-reading also provides a way to practice rhythm using chanting, clapping, or count singing, which are all useful strategies for learning pieces.
Singers evaluated their own progress in their self-reflective answers to survey questions. From the middle of the fall semester to the end, singers indicated that they felt more comfortable with sight-reading in the group setting, and also felt that they had improved in both the first and second halves of the semester. These sight-reading skills will be immensely useful not only in their auditions for singing groups on campus, but also in any other musical endeavor that they pursue.

![Pie chart showing self-reported development in sight-reading at the end of the fall semester](image)

**Figure 3. Choir member sight-reading improvement at the end of the fall semester**

**Why Sight-Reading for this Group?**

Sight-reading is a teachable, structured skill, in which progress is visible to both choir and conductor. The ability to identify clear improvement boosts confidence, which transfers to other aspects of singing that may be more complicated to assess. Because pitch and rhythm can be deemed either correct or incorrect, the black-and-white measurement of the process brings an element of science into the musical world. Having a comprehensible measure of progress can reduce stress for those who like to be constantly aware of how they are doing. Sight-reading is
also a skill that is applicable to other instruments, and to music classes, so singers can apply it in a myriad of ways after they finish singing with the group.

**Observation: Trouble Maintaining Tempo during Sight-reading Exercises**

During the chorus’ first semester, we regularly began rehearsal with warm-ups, followed by sight-reading exercises. The group was accustomed to this routine, and knew the basic rules of sight-reading: first, the primary goals are accuracy of rhythm and pitch, and, second, hand signs that represent the solfège syllables are to be used during chanting and singing. At first, the singers went very slowly through the exercises. I did not strongly enforce a steady tempo, in hopes that hesitation would increase pitch accuracy and, therefore, confidence, in sight-reading. Soon after, when I tried to keep the singers at a constant tempo during sight-reading by giving verbal reminders to maintain speed, and by conducting strictly in-tempo, I noticed that the singers had already developed a habit of slowing down; my gestures were completely disregarded and the singers inserted multiple unwritten ritardandos into every exercise.

**Action: Physical Representation of Tempo**

To help the singers internalize a regular beat, I asked them to slap their leg, stomp their foot, or do some other physical movement that would create an audible representation of the beat. At first, the singers maintained a tempo using this method without sight-reading, to practice keeping a steady beat. I then chose a slightly slower tempo than I thought necessary for the singers to reasonably sight-read an upcoming exercise, and asked them to read the exercise while continuing to slap or stomp.

**Reflection: More than the Tempo**

I mentally picked a tempo that I thought appropriate for the singers to have considerable success with the exercise, without it dragging. I then slowed it down a just a few clicks before
communicating it to the singers, to insure against the inclination singers may have had to pause or hesitate before a pitch that was difficult to find. Unfortunately, even the carefully chosen tempo and the audible beat did not keep the singers in time. They matched their production of the beat to the speed at which they were singing, but they did not seem to notice when their slaps and stomps were not in unison with the rest of the group. Because the alteration in tempo and individual production of beats did not fix the issue, I assumed there was another problem that I had not yet pinpointed.

**Action: Separating Rhythm from Pitches**

As I continued to encourage the singers to miss pitches if necessary to maintain the tempo, I also instituted another step to the sight-reading process, to make this request more manageable. Previously, I had had the singers begin the sight-reading process by taking approximately thirty seconds to one minute to look through the exercise before we started. I suggested that singers figure out solfège for at least the beginning portion or any tricky leaps before we began. Then, I led them slowly through singing the exercise while using hand signs. Because the singers were having such difficulty with hesitation before pitches that were hard to find, I added a chanting portion to our routine, in between looking through the exercise and the actual singing. The chanting portion consisted of speaking the solfège syllables in rhythm, without assigning those syllables to pitches.

**Reflection: Improvement in Keeping Tempo, but Difficulty with Unusual Intervals**

By this point, the singers were well aware of their tendency to slow down, and made some suggestions as to potential causes. Specifically, they cited “difficult pitches,” which were mostly leaps of thirds and fifths, other than those contained within the tonic triad of the home key, and perfect fourths. I chose sight-reading exercises that were challenging yet manageable,
so there were rarely leaps larger than a fifth. Using this proposed difficulty as the target for my next action, I moved forward with another activity to help the singers stop hesitating before uncomfortable intervals.

Action: Surreptitiously Introducing Sight-reading Ahead of Time

To help singers move through an exercise with ease, in hopes of creating a new habit of maintaining a steady tempo, I introduced the sight-reading exercise without alerting the singers to what I was doing. I showed the solfège syllables on my hand and they sang what I showed, which was a fairly regular activity. This time, I showed the solfège, in rhythm, of the sight-reading exercise, and they successfully sang along. I then immediately handed out the sheet with the exercise. I led them through our regular sight-reading routine, and they looked, chanted, and sang the exact same line they had just sung under my direction.

Reflection: Unaware of the Relationship Between Solfège Activity and Sight-reading

The execution of the sight-reading exercise following the solfège activity was not noticeably different than that of any other sight-reading exercise. After the first time through, I explicitly asked if any of the singers noticed any connection between the exercise and the activity, but they did not. I again showed the first few solfège syllables with my hand, and only then did the singers realize that the two had been the same. Because they did not consciously or subconsciously realize that I had previously exposed their ears to the intervals in the exercise, this action did not help the singers improve their ability to anticipate intervals, and thus did not remedy the tempo problem. Because none of my attempts to eliminate hesitancy in hearing the upcoming pitch had been successful, I turned my focus back to the tempo itself and helped the singers maintain a steady beat regardless of interval distance or direction.
Action: Count Sing and Conduct with Me

By Dr. Graham’s recommendation, I taught the singers how to count sing, and led them through a portion of a relatively new piece using this method. On a different occasion, I taught the singers a 4/4 conducting pattern and instructed them to conduct with me as they sang through a portion of familiar music. Once the singers were comfortable with these activities, I was able to use them during sight-reading exercises to help the choir maintain a steady tempo.

Reflection: Sustained Improvement and Opportunity to Learn about Time Signatures

Over time, I asked the singers to use various combinations of tapping, count singing, and conducting to help them stick with the tempo I had designated. I also learned not to let the music continue once there was a sustained period of time where the singers’ tempo did not agree with mine. Through sustained practice and adding more tools with which to tackle lagging beats, the singers and I made significant progress in maintaining tempo, particularly in sight-reading.

As I taught the singers how to count sing and how to conduct, I also had to explain the relationship between cut time and common time, because of the portion of music we were using to practice using these tools. Early in the year, I had explained what a time signature was, along with the basic principle behind figuring out which note value was called the “beat” and how many of those beats were in each bar. However, as I was teaching a piece, I often subdivided the beat and conducted in four, instead of in two, to keep the tempo despite the fact that we were going slower than we would in performance. Both count singing and conducting with me were altered by whether or not I had chosen to subdivide. This provided an opportunity to explain the reasoning behind subdivision, the relationship between cut time and common time, and how basic mathematical principles can apply to music and aid a developing singer.
Observation: Improvement in Sight-reading Ability Limited to Some Students

I gathered data on the singers’ ability and confidence with sight-reading through a number of different channels. I held individual meetings a few times each semester to check in with each singer, answer any questions that she may have, and assess her progress in a particular area. Sight-reading was one of the areas that I assessed during some of those meetings. I played a rather passive role during sight-reading exercises done with the full group, since singers were so focused on their music, hand signs, and the exercise that they were only looking to me for the beat. I was able to take advantage of this situation, in which I faded to the background, by observing one or two individuals during each group sight-reading session, to assess how she was progressing. The singers also filled out multiple self-reporting surveys throughout the year and I was able to see how they rated their own abilities and improvement, and how their answers changed over time. From these sources of data, I came to the conclusion that some singers made significant progress in their sight-reading ability, while others made only slight improvements.

Action: Tailored Instruction in Individual Meetings

As I continued to hold the individual meetings, I was able to give instruction tailored to each singer. With those that demonstrated strong progress with sight-reading, I gave them harder exercises to look at, and coached them through ways to quickly identify potential problem spots, and use clues within the music to help them figure out pitches or rhythm. For those who were weak sight-readers, I was able to help them hear particular intervals in familiar songs, so that they could be better prepared to sing those intervals in the context of the exercise. These meetings were also helpful for individual instruction in more than just sight-reading. For some students, I used the time as a mini voice lesson to correct a vocal fault, to help them realize the progress they had made, or to clarify instruction previously given to the group as a whole.
**Reflection: Progression through Exposure to Music**

When new singers joined the group at the beginning of each semester, I took a brief inventory of their musical backgrounds. With this information, I noticed that those who had any previous exposure to the written musical language, even if they considered it insignificant or if it was well in the past, more easily learned to sight-read than those who had less experience. Even those who had played instruments that primarily play in a clef other than treble were able to learn more quickly to read in the treble clef than those with no prior experience in any clef. Because of this correlation between exposure and speed of learning, I was especially grateful for having been exposed to music as a young child.

I also noticed that, separate from the direct effect of previous musical experience, a naturally good or practiced ear goes a long way. While all of the singers can sing according to the Kodály hand signs that I show, some are able to take that a step further and synthesize that sequence of pitches and rhythms into a tune they recognize. These singers are also the better sight-readers among the group.

Ultimately, all of the singers shared significant progress in their abilities. They made significant steps in the areas of assigning letter names to notes, following music along the staff, matching pitch with the other singers, and hearing and singing the tonic triad and other intervals. The process of teaching sight-reading has been exceptionally rewarding, and I am glad to have been a part of the musical improvement of these beginning singers.

**Observation: Some Blending and Tuning Issues Due to Lack of Aural Awareness**

This observation came from discoveries I made while reflecting on my actions that were targeted at correcting vowel shape, to help the singers stay on pitch. The end conclusion of my action research cycles on this topic was that some of the blending and tuning issues were caused
by a lack of aural awareness. While ear training augments the development of vocal technique, developing the ear itself is part of musicianship training, so the continuation of ear training research continues in this section. I implemented a series of actions focused on developing aural awareness, and then reflected on the series as a whole.

**Action: Pointing out Intervals Between Voices in Rounds and Warm-ups**

To relate our interval practice using solfège to more authentic situations, I began to point out specific intervals between the voices in warm-ups or in rounds. In these situations, the singers did not have any music in front of them, and had to rely only on their ears to identify intervals. I asked the singers to periodically switch into solfège during the warm-up, to make them even more aware of intervallic relationships, and had them pause as they sang rounds to hear the interplay between their voices.

**Action: Using “Ah, Robyn!”**

When I first introduced the piece, “Ah, Robyn!” I told the singers that the melody would alternate between all three of the voice parts. I taught all of them the opening few bars, even though that portion was designated to only the first sopranos, and then asked them to look ahead to where another voice repeated the same melody. The singers labeled the beginning of each subsequent line with solfège syllables to figure out where the pattern was similar to the opening melody. In so doing, they were using the visual notation of sound to identify how the melody traveled between the voice parts in segments.

Once I had led the singers through the piece in this way, and we had further rehearsed the piece, the singers started to become comfortable taking turns singing the melody as a continuous line, with each singer joining in or dropping out as her line dictated. By having the singers use the melody in this way, I enabled them to engage with their ears what they had previously
noticed visually in the musical notation. Drawing their attention to the melody’s pattern helped them understand the structure of the piece, and become more aware of the sound that was happening around them, even when they were not singing. Even advanced amateur singers tend to mentally disconnect when they spend an extended period of time without singing, so it is significant that these singers were keyed into the sound even when not personally vocalizing. As they progressed in learning the rest of the parts, the singers were quickly able to identify how portions of the harmony were also repeated in patterns throughout the voice parts, while responding to my comments to “bring out the melody” or “stronger harmony part here.” When the appropriate group made a crescendo when asked, the singers proved that they were constantly aware of how each of their individual lines fit into the whole, even though that relationship was constantly in flux throughout the piece.

Because using an authentic piece provided an immediately applicable situation for the skill the singers were striving to develop, I looked further into “Ah, Robyn!” to see what else we could learn from it that was directly related to developing aural awareness. Following an exercise that targeted hearing and feeling a straight rhythm against a dotted one, I brought back “Ah, Robyn!” as a means of seeing and hearing this particular set of rhythms in a piece. The singers identified the sections in which a straight rhythm was sung against a dotted one, and I led them through a practice of those sections. The immediate application of the combination of rhythms that they had just practiced hearing helped to solidify the accuracy of the rhythm in the piece from that day forward.

**Action: Engaging Listening Skills in Warm-Ups**

Warm-ups are an essential part of every choral rehearsal. By nature of being routine, I sometimes had more difficulty mentally engaging the singers during this portion of rehearsal
than during the sight-reading and piece-study portions. To make warm-ups worthwhile, not only for the preparation of the singing instrument, but also for the development of aural awareness from the beginning of rehearsal, I instituted a number of higher-level tuning exercises.

During most of the exercises, the singers worked in multiple parts despite their small numbers. Sometimes, that meant that only two singers were singing any one part. However, those singers focused intently, and I could tell that, although they were lacking in numbers, they did not let that translate to a lack of determination. I also asked the singers to sing the exercises without the piano, unless it was absolutely necessary. If the singers lost their tuning, I paused the singing, asked the accompanist to reiterate the correct notes, and then asked the singers to come back in. For example, one exercise to practice descending intervals entailed singing up the scale to the fifth, then singing from the fifth down to each previous note of the scale. If the singers made one of those descending leaps too large, I called on the accompanist to set us back on track.

**Reflection: Developing a Refined Listening Ear**

All of the above actions served to help singers refine their listening skills. Noticing the relationship of melody and harmony as related to the structure of a piece, and hearing the difference between the two, is a step in the right direction. Another significant step is an ability to hear multiple rhythms at the same time, and understand how they relate to each other well enough to sing through the same rhythmic passage consistently without error. A third step towards developing the ear was made through the tuning exercises. Learning to manipulate chords without the help of the piano, and hear pitch well enough to maintain it among many other singers is not easy, and the singers have made significant progress in this regard as well. Continuing the process of ear training will help the singers to understand even more about the
intricacies of the pieces they sing, thereby increasing the satisfaction of performance and depth of learning that comes from each piece.

My own ear training is also an important aspect of my job as the conductor. Through the specific actions described in this section, I learned how to use a piece to choose specific activities and skills on which to focus, which are easily relatable to the rehearsal of that piece. While this did not directly augment my aural skills, I drew upon my observations to create the activity, and then relied on and developed my aural skills by listening intently to the chorus to see how well they responded to my comments and gestures. I again worked on developing my own ear as I evaluated whether or not the singers had internalized the coordination of rhythms by carefully listening as they put the exercise into context, singing the portion of the piece that contained the chosen combination of rhythms. Most directly, I developed my own ear by listening carefully to multiple parts while the singers were working on tuning exercises, to determine whether or not they were in tune. If they were not, I also listened for which part or parts needed to change. This was challenging for me, and there were times when I could tell that the singers were not in tune, but I misdiagnosed their particular error, deeming them flat when they were sharp or vice-versa.

The above actions were focused on augmenting the singers’ ear training, and therefore only secondarily contributed to my own. During the majority of each rehearsal, however, I am engaged in my own ear training development. I am constantly listening for specific aspects of quality choral singing such as accuracy of pitches, tone of an individual or group, tuning, pronunciation, articulation, etc., and am hearing things more quickly than I was at the beginning of the semester. I have noticed from watching my rehearsal videos that I respond more quickly to
what I am hearing. This is likely an effect both of being comfortable with using the tools that I had learned to change or augment the sound, and of hearing more minute errors in the singing.

**Challenges**

Through my research in musicianship training, I identified a number of challenges unique to this topic. I also learned the importance of bringing targeted musicianship practice into the bigger picture of artistic expression through music.

One of my struggles was figuring out how to introduce basic music theory in a way that was informative and clear, without being overwhelming. Few students had taken a music theory class before singing in the chorus, but almost everyone came in with a solid ability to identify letter names within the treble staff. Other than that, the ability level varied, and I found it difficult to explain concepts completely enough that beginners would understand, while still keeping the attention of those who were already familiar with the topic. Another layer of challenge came because I was trying to decrease the ratio of my time talking to my time showing, by gesture or by model, and this was particularly difficult with music theory.

In a similar vein, I wanted to present vocabulary in a meaningful way, such that the singers would have a clear understanding of the word and its context, without appearing condescending. Webb and Robinson suggest using musical terminology at every opportunity, since it is more professional than the “casual, informal, conversational directives” (145) conductors are wont to use instead. I used musical vocabulary to be exact, but refrained from using musical terms in any given rehearsal in which I had already used many new words. Instead, I used colloquial language to explain the musical concept. Because our group is small and we meet often, singers are comfortable asking me to clarify any musical term they come across, either in the music or spoken aloud.
Learning and practicing musicianship skills involves a process of drills and exercises, even when many of those are embedded in the study of authentic pieces. It was sometimes challenging to bring musicianship practice into the bigger picture of artistic expression through music. I used phrasing exercises and discussion of texts to provide meaning and reason for the time spent on musicianship skills (see Conducting: Case Study).
6. Conducting

Introduction

One of the main goals set forth at the beginning of this project was to create a situation to advance and improve my conducting skills. In this section, I will discuss my development in gesture, effective verbal communication, teaching techniques, and rehearsal techniques, all of which are critical facets of conducting.

Since conductors do not have their own instrument, they depend on a group of singers for their own practice and improvement. I used a number of different methods to measure my progress and incorporate the feedback I received from the group, from myself, and from my advisor, Dr. Graham. I videotaped each rehearsal, and reviewed the video on my own or with Dr. Graham to practice identifying things I could improve. It was much easier to gauge the clarity of my gesture through watching the recording than it was during the rehearsal, although the immediate aural feedback was easier to read in person than it was on the video. I have significant experience watching and vocally responding to gesture, because I have sung in choirs for many years, but have much less experience with the physical sensation of producing gesture. Therefore, my eyes are a better tool for me to gauge gesture clarity than if the motion ‘feels right.’

When Dr. Graham attended my rehearsals, she made notes about what was going well and what I could improve. I could immediately incorporate this feedback and use it to inform my rehearsal technique, gesture, and research direction. I also received feedback from other singers whom I guest-conducted for a brief time. Through this experience, I was enlightened about some gestures I was using that were not clear or were less effective than I had previously realized. Using them with a new group of singers who were not accustomed to my habits or technique was
incredibly eye-opening, and helped me realize that I was able to show dynamic contrast well, but I did not always give clear entrances, which challenged many of the singers who did not read music well.

While many of these methods of data collection and feedback were focused on gesture, a relevant and important component of conducting, I also focused my own observations and targeted improvement on effective verbal communication, teaching techniques, and rehearsal techniques.

**Observation: Unclear Where the Ictus Falls**

In the preparation immediately preceding our performance at the end of the fall semester, I came across significant difficulty altering tempi to get our performance pieces up to the desired metronome marking. I had noticed issues with tempo before (see Musicianship Training: Trouble Maintaining Tempo during Sight-reading Exercises, Chapter 5), but I was now experiencing both the inability to alter tempo intentionally and the inability to stop the tempo from altering if the singers were collectively speeding up or slowing down unintentionally. With assistance from multiple of the aforementioned sources of feedback, I decided that the singers could not read the tempo I was trying to show. The lack of a clear ictus inhibited the singers’ ability to follow my gesture.

**Action: Practicing in Front of a Mirror**

To practice producing a clear pattern with a coherent ictus, I conducted in front of a mirror and paid particular attention to my wrist. I concentrated on giving weight to my gesture as if I was bouncing a basketball and using wrist movement to indicate a clear rebound. By watching myself, I was able to strengthen the muscle memory of indicating a clear ictus by simultaneously monitoring myself visually.
**Reflection: Problems that can be Alleviated by Showing a Clear Beat**

Once I had practiced on my own, I began to notice the benefits of showing a clear beat. I could then confidently insist on a tempo and timely entrances because I had solidified the connection between my intended tempo and the tempo I was showing. I could more easily tell if the singers were slowing down independent of my gesture, or if my gesture was causing the ritard. My increased confidence in how my gesture appeared to the singers also backed up my request that the singers look up at me while they were singing, which led to greater ensemble between myself and the singers.

**Observation: Losing Attention, Especially During Theory Explanations**

I noticed that I was losing the singers’ attention during the introduction of new theory topics. Since learning theory and musicianship training were part of the goals of the group, and singers had indicated that they wanted to learn more theory, I was initially confused by this reaction. Then I realized that what made rehearsals with theory lessons different from other rehearsals was an increased ratio of ‘talking’ to ‘showing’, since I primarily used speaking to introduce the new concepts. Engagement was higher on days when that ratio was lower.

**Action: Decreased Ratio of Talking to Showing and Doing**

Going forward, I renewed my commitment to talk less and do more by showing increased expressivity, phrasing, and affekt in my gesture, and using more modeling in my teaching. By encouraging the singers to imitate me as I, for example, demonstrated a swallowed versus a forward sound, I engaged their voices even though I was giving a lesson, rather than rehearsing a specific piece. I also instructed the singers to work in partners or small groups to further vary the type of communication utilized during rehearsal.
Reflection: Mediums of Communication

Many conductors and music pedagogues warn against talking too much during rehearsal. As Webb and Robinson reminded me in their book *Up Front*, the singers were there to sing, and I needed always to remember that primary purpose (143). Keeping singers engaged was part of my job as the conductor, and finding ways to have the singers acting and interacting physically helped that, as did my own physical engagement through gesture that saved time and energy spent on verbal explanations.

Author’s Note: Teaching by Analogy

As I documented my experiences with action research cycles specifically regarding vocal technique and musicianship training, I realized how frequently I used analogy to communicate concepts to the singers. Concepts of vocal technique are very abstract, and involve listening and using the body in ways that are very new to amateur singers. Analogies are the quickest way to create an understanding of sound and help singers conceptualize, feel, and describe variations in sound. Also, much of quality vocal production demands control of involuntary muscles like the diaphragm and the muscles of the larynx. Analogy helps the amateur singer use the body to correctly adjust the involuntary muscles without struggling to try to intentionally alter them (which, by definition, will not work). This efficient method has helped the chorus members produce and hear slight differences in sound, aiding their vocal and musical development.

Other Lessons Learned

Responding More Quickly to What I See and Hear in the Moment

One of my biggest challenges in the transition from conducting only one piece at a time with a predetermined amount of rehearsal time (as I did with the Wellesley College Choir) to leading my own group was determining how to allocate rehearsal time. While I still make mistakes and over or underestimate the amount of time an activity or rehearsing a portion of a
piece will take, I have become much more flexible in accommodating those miscalculations. Similarly, I respond more quickly to the ensemble, reaching into my metaphorical toolbox, choosing a tool, and using it to address the issue more directly as I progress over time. For example, at the beginning of the school year I heard that the singers were not on pitch, and addressed that by asking Dr. Graham for suggestions after the rehearsal. By springtime, I was able to stop the singers once the flatness occurred and identify intrinsic and extrinsic factors that may have been the cause. I could then use multiple methods of increasing breath support and drawing the singers’ ear to the problem, before listening again to the group to assess whether or not the issue had been resolved.

The action research cycle I have used to guide this project is a constant pattern of observing, acting, and reflecting, some iterations of which I have included in this paper. This cycle, however, happens constantly during every moment of rehearsal as I constantly work to identify an issue, try something, see if it had the intended effect, try something else, reflect, and so on. As I have practiced problem solving on the spot through hours and hours of rehearsal, I have gotten more adept at using the process, knowing what to try, critically listening and watching to see the effect of my action, and figuring out what to do next. It has been encouraging to have Dr. Graham bring this significant improvement to my attention, because this is one of the clear outcomes that has come as a direct result of the time I have put into this project. While I hope to be conducting, or at least involved with choirs, for my whole life, this is a skill that will help me in any number of pursuits, musical or otherwise. I certainly have a long way to go, but I look forward to continuing that journey with the chorus for the next couple of weeks (and ultimately, for the rest of my life) as I perfect my craft and help myself and others make music.
**Connecting Expressivity to Movement**

I have never been athletically gifted, and am not naturally aware of my body. I grew up playing the piano, and through many years of practice, my fingers learned how to subconsciously translate the expressive markings on the page to nuanced alterations in how I played. Because I had not practiced any instrument or sport that required the muscle memory and nuanced expressivity of my whole arms, learning the gestural aspect of conducting was difficult for me. I succeeded because of many years as a singer watching a conductor; I had some idea of what gesture was supposed to look like and could mimic any specific action I identified. I struggled, though, with remembering how to indicate certain expressive markings, because of my undeveloped muscle memory and lack of ease in using my body. I also struggled to figure out how to use movement to convey a particular expressive idea when I had not been explicitly taught how to show that idea. Through watching videos of myself taken during my first conducting class, I helped remind myself of movements I had previously learned, but my body did not immediately remember how to perform. Through targeted observation of Dr. Graham during choir rehearsals that I attended concurrently with running my own rehearsals, I added more expressive techniques to my repertoire while demystifying, at least to some degree, what makes her such an effective conductor.

**Case Study: “Sally Gardens”**

The following case study of my preparation, rehearsal, and performance of “Sally Gardens” will focus on using effective rehearsal structuring and gesture to synthesize technique, musicianship, and expression to make this piece performance-ready. As previously stated, I chose this piece because I had studied it in conducting class, and because the unison melody allowed me to focus my efforts and those of the singers on communicating the text and expressivity through nuanced phrasing.
Communicating Text

The text of this piece is in English and comes from the poet William Butler Yeats (Britten, 1). After rehearsing the piece long enough for it to be familiar, I made time in rehearsal for us to discuss and interpret the poetry of the text. This discussion informed the subsequent phrasing exercises, because we focused on the meaning of the text and how it fit with the music. The poem is written from the point of view of someone singing about his lost female lover, and some of the singers decided to think of themselves as the speaker of this text, about their own love, or as a narrator empathizing with the speaker’s situation. As Cleland and Dobre-Grindahl state, “Performance is a medium of communication. One must have something to say in order to have a successful performance, and then she must say it so that the audience understands” (376). Once the singers had assigned personal meaning to the text, we looked at the dynamics and I suggested adjectives to describe the sound according to the written dynamics and our discussion of the meaning of the text. As the singers practiced creating appropriate affekts for each section of the piece and assigning meaning, they naturally enunciated the words and exhibited more interesting facial expressions. With further coaching on maintaining formality of vowels and creating crisp consonants, the text became even more alive to the singers and to me as the listener. Singers who act as though they understand what they are singing are much more engaging to watch, because they add facial expression that allows ‘hearing with the eyes,’ further augmenting the sound in a meaningful way beyond what one could hear on just an audio recording.

Phrasing

Webb and Robinson set forth the following “Golden Rule” of conducting in regards to phrasing: “no two consecutive notes, syllables or words should ever receive equal emphasis” (145). In striving to achieve this goal, I used continuous, lyrical phrases to try to create forward
motion with some logical pauses. The beautiful arching phrases, necessitated by the vocal line, lend themselves to either a delicate crescendo or slight decrescendo on almost every note. The sweeping line is either building or falling away all the time as the arsis and thesis of the phrase dictate.

Phrasing is one of the key elements of creating beautiful music that I did not always encourage during our sight-reading exercises, or even right away, when learning many of our pieces. Over time, I learned the importance of practicing extended dynamic ranges of which the group was capable, and of practicing steady, consistent crescendos and decrescendos, which formed the basis for creating the hairpin phrase. Attaching meaning to the text of the poem helped the singers phrase very naturally despite the length of the phrases because they understood the close relationship of the words and the shape of the musical line.

Understanding why and how the accompaniment and vocal lines interacted was an important aspect of my own study, and prepared my later work with the singers. Because the vocal line was in unison with multiple verses and the piano primarily provided atmospheric color in the background, any change in either the dynamics or the accompaniment was significant. In the piece, the accompaniment broadens at one point, supporting the singers as they match with their own increased dynamic. The loping, easy bass line of the accompaniment paints the scene of a sunny day by the river, and the calming memory on which the speaker or narrator looks back. Drawing singers’ attention to these slight texture changes, as well as to the harmonic changes that the piano initiates or supports, reinforced the affekt applied to each individual phrase.
Performance Considerations

Britten has arranged “Sally Gardens” for multiple different numbers and types of voices. Because he originally arranged the piece for a high voice, soprano or tenor, I chose an arrangement in the soprano register for the group. I soon realized that this arrangement stretched the singers’ comfort zone too much, and led to strained squeaky notes in their higher register. I returned with a new arrangement intended for lower voices, either mezzo or baritone, and the range was much more appropriate. Because the first version had extended the singers’ range so much, singing the highest pitches in the new version was easy in comparison. This phenomenon happened by accident, but helped the singers have confidence in their higher register, which brought ping and resonance to the sound.
**Takeaways**

Through the process of studying and rehearsing this particular piece, I came to conclusions about what I would do differently next time, and learned broader lessons that I can apply to other pieces. The first lesson I learned is that no matter how much I study a work beforehand, there are always new things that I learn about the piece from working on it in a new environment with new singers. “It is the conductor’s full responsibility to know all that can be known about the music,” (Webb, 122) but there are always continuous layers of learning as the piece evolves with each choir. I have gained a greater appreciation for the fluid nature of each individual piece, the value and necessity of score study, and the beauty of learning from each intricacy along with the choir as the piece comes to life.

Much of the time, I think I am showing more affekt and dynamic contrast than comes across to someone watching my conducting. I can *always* show more, even though that means an often-painstaking process that involves singing or playing something in a naturally musical and expressive way, analyzing exactly what I did to make the passage “musical,” and then figuring out how to communicate each of those fine distinctions using movement. With this particular piece, I focused on expression, because it was fairly easy for the singers to initially learn the basics of the piece. In the future, I can focus on expression to the same extent with other pieces, even if they are more difficult to learn. I have found that even with very difficult passages in other pieces, adding in expressive elements during the learning phases aids the learning of notes and rhythms rather than hindering it.

Based on nonverbal cues from rehearsal and comments from individual meetings, I gleaned that many singers did not consider “Sally Gardens” to be a difficult piece. I did not realize this until we had been rehearsing the piece for some time, and I then wondered if the singers considered it worthwhile that we spent so much rehearsal time working on it past the
point that they could all sing the notes and rhythms without error. I pointed out that unison singing can be quite challenging to do well, but I am not convinced that they believed me. Looking back, I believe singers noticed the simplicity of the piece, and therefore assumed the piece was easy to sing well. In the future, I can more thoroughly help singers understand that making a simple piece excellent is just as challenging as learning a piece in multiple parts with complex rhythms.
7. Participation Dynamics

Bonding

Many people choose to sing in choir because of a natural human tendency to want to be part of a larger entity. Some find that “higher calling” in being just one voice in a chorus. Singing is a very vulnerable act, perhaps because the instrument of a singer comes from within the body, and many people participating in the same vulnerable act together tend to value a sense of community and camaraderie with each other. As a member of many choirs in the past, I was aware of the importance that many singers place on a sense of community within the group, and the need to help singers get to know each other so that they could create those interpersonal bonds.

During the first weeks of rehearsal, once our numbers had settled and it became apparent who would be continuing to sing with the group, I led the singers in a few “getting-to-know-you” games. We all learned each other’s names, which created a more comfortable atmosphere for rehearsing. People still did not know each other well, though, and the room was consistently silent before and after rehearsals. Often the only conversation was between me and one or two singers who spoke up when I asked them direct questions about their week or a recent school break. I assume that most of this timidity could be attributed to the fact that all of the singers were new to Wellesley, and this was just one of many new environments that they faced within a very short period of time. I was pleased to notice that, as time went by, singers eventually began to willingly interact with each other before and after rehearsal. To enhance this new trend, we did another familiarity game in the middle of the semester, and had an informal group lunch one day during community time when there are no scheduled classes. Despite the fact that a number of
singers had indicated that they wanted some structured bonding activity outside of rehearsal, only two people came to the lunch, so I did not repeat the event.

At the end of the first semester, one girl was returning to her home country after having finished her study abroad experience at Wellesley, and a few others notified me that they were committing their time to other activities, work obligations, or schoolwork, and would not be continuing. When we returned in the spring, we welcomed new members, who were then compelled to join a community of singers who were already familiar and quite comfortable with each other. I led another round of name games to include the new members, but they seemed to integrate into the group much more quickly than the singers who started in the fall semester. It was very helpful for a community to already exist, because the new singers just had to feel comfortable enough to join it. Not surprisingly, the second semester new singers developed bonds within the group much more quickly than those of the first semester group, who had to first create a community. Aiding and observing these dynamics within the group reinforced my idea that a sense of belonging is important to singers. It also helped me realize the benefit of having singing groups that include members of multiple class years, so that the community rarely has to be totally rebuilt at the beginning of each school year.

**Commitment**

Singers were attentive during rehearsal, despite our rehearsal time of four o’clock in the afternoon, which is often a difficult time of day for many people to find energy. During the fall semester, attendance was fairly good overall, though there was an understandable mid-semester wane during midterms. Because our numbers were fairly small at that time (there were twelve singers) and those who were present were constantly striving to improve, absences of other singers were both obvious and irksome to the most committed singers. Results of the end-of-
semester survey indicated that the singers wanted more personal responsibility for absences. When we returned in the spring, I had each new and returning singer sign an attendance contract stating that they would miss no more than three rehearsals per semester, and always notify me ahead of time when they were going to be absent (see Appendix C for the contract). While this did not completely eliminate unforeseen absences, it noticeably improved the attendance of the group and helped me prepare accordingly when I knew a number of people would be gone. Putting the expectation in writing also reduced stress for me, knowing that the singers fully understood the expectation, and that I was justified in following up if they had unexpectedly missed a rehearsal. Because this chorus was certainly not the only extracurricular with which most students were involved, and because they were all adjusting to the immense workload at Wellesley, I was both impressed that the majority of singers stuck it out through at least one semester, and glad that they were rewarded for doing so. By scheduling two hours of rehearsal a week and holding singers responsible to a standard of commitment, I lost some singers who would have otherwise participated. I am confident, however, that the singers who did choose to participate made more progress toward the goal of being prepared to join an auditioned singing group on campus than they would have if other, less committed, singers been involved with the group.
8. Overall Reflection

The Many Hats of a Conductor

Because I was an officer in the Wellesley College Choir during the course of this year and had also previously served as an officer in the past, I entered the chorus project with an idea of the logistical efforts required to operate a large choir. What I did not fully anticipate was the number of logistical needs of new choirs, even if they are small. I learned through personal experience that at some point a conductor will play many, if not all of the following roles: performance coordinator, room reserver, instrumentalist finder, and program publisher. The conductor also serves as the coordinator of activities including publicizing open rehearsals and concerts, person who secures funding, recruiter for the group, fosterer of the relationships between members of the group, and of course, the musical guide. Learning about all of the coordination behind running a group has increased my respect for my current and previous choral directors, and has helped me realize how much behind-the-scenes work probably occurs for many groups or classes of which I have been a part. Running a choir seems to be similar to managing a small business, in that the CEO starts out doing everything herself but eventually she acquires an assistant or officers to help with the logistics as the organization grows. As an officer in the choir, I thoroughly enjoy organizing the logistics behind many choir-related tasks and events. In the context of my own chorus, however, I wanted to focus my time and efforts on the musical capacities of the position and did not always find joy in the other tasks associated with my role as conductor. It was hard to maintain the priority of fostering music making while still finding the motivation to take care of all the logistics; however, that challenge helped me grow as a conductor and as a leader. I learned that organizational efforts are essential to allow the music to take place, which led to an appreciation of both aspects of the conductor’s job. I now
see how the head of a musical organization is not just the head of the “music” part of that title, but also of the “organization.”

**The Choral Experience as the Conductor**

As a veteran choral singer, I am well versed on the experience of being on the choir’s side of the podium. Every year of choir is different, but I am accustomed to the parts of the singer’s choral experience that always stay the same. As the permanent conductor of every rehearsal, I experience the institution of the choir very differently. The chorus is not really a place to let off steam, as singing in choir usually is, because of the preparation and presentation elements of leading rehearsal. Especially during the first semester, I felt nervous before most rehearsals, which is dramatically different from the excitement I feel going in to sing in a choir rehearsal. With time, this nervousness subsided and since the beginning it has been satisfying to finish rehearsal and know that I helped the singers make progress toward their goals. Despite my emotional or physical state upon entering the rehearsal, I tend to ‘click on’ when rehearsal begins, and it is often just what I need to brighten my day or make me feel like I did something that really mattered. While I certainly enjoy singing in choir, I leave chorus rehearsal with a greater sense of excitement and accomplishment that is the result of my active role in the rehearsal. Even when it does not go as well as I had hoped, I am definitely more invested in my day-to-day chorus experience than I am in that of the WCC. Seeing the conductor’s point of view has helped me get more out of my singing experience as a choir member as well, partially because I am more aware of what Dr. Graham is trying to get us to do, and I can take note of the different methods she uses to get us there. As the conductor of the chorus, my priority is helping the singers experience the music, and sometimes that comes with the price of me not being as lost in the natural interpretation of the music as I am while singing. Continuing to have a
personal, private connection with choral music as a singer in the choir informs my conducting by keeping me grounded in the intimate reasons I sing in the first place.

**Development of Leadership Skills**

As the musical and organizational leader of the group, I learned valuable leadership skills that will be applicable to future musical endeavors, as well as to other aspects of my personal and professional life. I am more comfortable speaking in front of a group than I used to be, and have become more adept at articulating ideas. I have learned the necessity of finding adjectives that accurately describe the sound that I want. This skill will be helpful in my own choral singing, as I relate passages of music to specific adjectives, creating meaning and musicality. The skill of providing clear explanations and articulating the standards that I hold are very applicable to many non-musical professional settings as well. Because I am accustomed to academic discourse about the relationships between musical concepts and specific vocabulary, it was hard to move away from that enough to explain the basics. Separating these interrelated concepts enough to explain only one idea thoroughly, without having to diverge into tangential explanations about other related topics and terms, initially presented a daunting challenge.

I planned thoughtfully in an attempt to make rehearsal engaging and appropriately challenging for the singers. Different age groups, learning situations, time, and other factors - including the personalities and capabilities of the students themselves - will determine the level of engagement and the appropriate level of instruction when using these skills in non-musical settings. It will certainly be a challenge to apply each of these rehearsal-planning techniques to various teaching situations, but recognizing that these are valuable factors to consider when preparing to teach any group is a step towards being a better teacher and leader.
During rehearsal I have both struggled with, and learned the benefit of, balancing ample encouragement with surplus praise, such that the compliments retained their meaning. By routinely commending the group in the same way, my words probably lost value such that one additional compliment was no longer anything remarkable. I have learned to be much more intentional with praise, such that I do not use it lightly, and I reserve it for times that are really special. However, I am careful to maintain a positive atmosphere in rehearsal. I still occasionally revert to my previous habit of saying, “good” when I really should find an alternative that is not a value judgment. Giving only sincere, intentional praise is something that I want to be able to do just as much when I am presenting or in the spotlight, as when I am interacting normally with others. Breaking this habit of using “good” as a filler word in rehearsal or presentation situations not only helps the people with whom I am working know that I speak with sincerity, but also helps me be more true to myself in front of an audience.

Given some period of time, I tend to be able to make friends easily in new environments, but I am not used to fostering bonds between others in public circumstances. In taking on this aspect of my new role, I noticed that any one-on-one time I could spend with individual singers was very valuable. Even short individual meetings allowed me to converse with choir members outside of the group setting, hear more of their thoughts, and see another piece of their personalities. Realizing the value of these meetings can help my future relations with co-workers, and with others with whom I collaborate in non-work environments. I have found a new respect for leaders who create a strong culture within their workplace or organization, and I am glad that I have many exemplars of such leadership in my life. While I am still a beginner in the art of creating a strong community of singers, I aspire to help people unite behind a common goal, no matter what that goal may be. For now, I hope that, through the one-on-one time and the
group rehearsals, the singers know how much I care about the music that we make together, and how much I care about them, not only as singers, but also as individuals.
Appendix A: Recruitment Materials

Wellesley Preparatory Chorus

“I want to sing in a choir but I’m not yet confident in my vocal skills.”

Open Rehearsal Tuesday 2.4.14
4:15pm in the Chapel

Email klackey@wellesley.edu with

Wellesley Preparatory Chorus

“I want to sing, but I don’t have a lot of time for a singing group.”

Open Rehearsal Tuesday 2.4.14
4:15pm in the Chapel

Email klackey@wellesley.edu with
Wellesley Preparatory Chorus

“I want to sing in a small group with others who are seeking to improve their vocal skills.”

Open Rehearsal Tuesday 2.4.14
4:15pm in the Chapel

Exp 3.1.14   Email klackey@wellesley.edu with questions   Dis: jwice

Wellesley Preparatory Chorus

“I want to sing in a group on campus without having to audition.”

Open Rehearsal Tuesday 2.4.14
4:15pm in the Chapel

Exp 3.1.14   Email klackey@wellesley.edu with   Dis: jwice
Appendix B: Scores


Appendix C: Attendance Contract

Wellesley Preparatory Chorus Contract

As a member of the Wellesley Preparatory Chorus, I will do my best to further the learning and enjoyment of the group for myself and other singers. To do this,

_______ I will miss no more than three rehearsals. *If you have already discussed a conflict with me, please indicate that you will miss no more rehearsals than the ones we discussed.*

_______ If I am going to miss rehearsal, I will notify Kendall ahead of time.

_______ I will be ready to begin rehearsal at the appointed time with a pencil. *If you have already discussed a reoccurring event that causes you to be late/leave early, please indicate that you will be on time for the other rehearsals.*

_______ If I am going to be late or leave early, I will notify Kendall ahead of time.

_______ I will set up/ clean up from rehearsal at my appointed time.

_______ I will keep track of my music and write on it only in pencil.

Sign Here: ____________________________________________
Bibliography


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