

# Heterophonic Vocal Music Training: Extending Sound Before Symbol

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Music teachers, like all educators, critically reflect on how they are preparing their students to apply the subject matter outside of the classroom. The goal of musical literacy is valid, for example, yet reading and writing music do not in themselves constitute a comprehensive music education; in fact, some of the ways in which reading and writing are taught are not very musical at all. Musicianship and musical thinking, therefore, must also be emphasized. The musical skills acquired through performance traditions can nurture such musicianship. Moreover, aural performance traditions often afford musicians flexibility to not merely *re-create* music, but to *create*, innovate, and contribute new, individual musical thoughts and variations. One way to invite such flexibility and creativity into a choral environment is to introduce heterophony, using sound before symbol approaches.

## What is Heterophony and Why Do We Need It?

Heterophony, also termed polyphonic stratification, involves variations of a single melody by multiple musical performers at the same time. A choir in which individual singers simultaneously interpret a melody in different ways creates a heterophonic texture. From the music of Bach to Boulez, planned heterophonic textures can be identified; spontaneous heterophony, however, is more often observed in non-Western music ensembles. For a more contemporary reference, Ray

Charles provided a clear demonstration of heterophonic decision-making in the line leading into the closing fadeout of "We are the World."

Diversity of sound and musical thought are part and parcel of spontaneous heterophony. A casual observer to a heterophonic choral rehearsal might confuse individual musical differences with musical mistakes. On the contrary, these heterophonic variations between singers are expected and encouraged. Heterophony is particularly appropriate when working with contemporary music. In fact, choral directors that rehearse pop selections in only a uniform and precise manner might reconsider if their interpretations align with the musical style that they are teaching.

The skills needed for heterophonic musicianship translate well to contemporary musicianship. In pop music, vocal embellishments and ornamentations (often called runs and riffs) are usually anticipated, but seldom reproduced in any exact form from one performance to another. For vocalists, contemporary melodies are merely a skeleton upon which they can flesh out their interpretations. Students interested in contemporary music, therefore, can develop many valuable and relevant vocal tools within a heterophonic choral environment.

### **Teaching Spontaneous Heterophony: Sound Before Symbol**

Choral directors can find clues about teaching spontaneous heterophony from non-Western musical cultures. Throughout the world, there are rich examples of improvisation and oral composition, including Kaluli spontaneous composition, Korean sanjo, Fulani praise-song, and Arabian nawbaor wasla (Blum, 2001). Music educators grounded in a sense of Western music exceptionalism might disregard such approaches, but they cannot ignore the historical significance and influence of widespread aural traditions. Closer to home, there are

abundant examples of 20<sup>th</sup> century improvisational genres, including blues music and its antecedents/derivatives. In each of these examples, aural skills are essential. Furthermore, according to Green (2002), listening/copying is the primary way in which students learn popular music; notation is secondary (p. 69).

Music is foremost an aural experience, not a visual one. Upon this fundamental musical truth, philosophies of music education were founded, far before the formalisation of American music education in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, for example, Rousseau believed that sensory experiences (sounds), as opposed to representations (symbols), should be impressed upon learners (Benedict, 2010). Like Pestalozzi's (1801) sequence of speaking before reading (p. 84), this sound before symbol approach influenced Mason's (1834) seminal manual of instruction for music education.

To achieve heterophonic musicianship using this philosophy, choral directors should provide singers with myriad aural experiences of diverse melodic interpretations, in order to build a robust musical vocabulary. This approach echoes the aural traditions of non-Western musical cultures. Conversely, notation in its printed form is fixed prior to performance, and thus imposes artificial limitations to musical possibilities. While notation remains a valuable tool, particularly for composers intending to disseminate their music to performers, it should never become a crutch that fetters creativity among performing musicians.

### **Where to Start: A Vignette**

Aiming to approach a new piece heterophonically, the choral director does not distribute sheet music. Instead, the director employs a multi-model aural approach. In this first rehearsal, choral participants listen to at least three

different versions of the same song. These variations include original and cover artists, as well as studio and live contexts. While listening, students write notes on the merits and shortcomings of each version. There are no right or wrong thoughts for this opening activity; the purpose is simply to get the participants to listen and think deeply and musically. The choral director facilitates a student discussion following each model. At the conclusion of this activity, the director provides a performance demonstration as an additional model. Students are already singing along, and nascent heterophony begins to organically texturize the music.

In the following rehearsal, the choral director starts with another performance demonstration, this time with different melodic choices. Students, singing along, stop and hesitate when they notice a new decision, to assess the alteration and whether they have observed a choice or a mistake. The director chooses not to acknowledge the new decision, to foster a culture in which musical choices are met without judgment. Throughout the rehearsal process, the director continues to experiment and play with the melody, and the students are never informed that they are working toward heterophony. The label is simply not applied. In early phases, students parrot back musical decisions that they have heard before. Over time, students become more emboldened and independent, as confidence in individual melodic vocabularies strengthen. When new or surprising musical choices emerge from students in later phases, they are acknowledged with an exchange of gratified, knowing smiles.

### **Nurturing Creativity Over Reproduction**

How often do we ask young writers not merely to quote, but to process thoughts and put them in their own words? Why, then, should we not do the same in music? Music educators can provide a melodic framework upon which they can create, rather

than recreate. The encouragement and cultivation of heterophonic creativity has broader implications that extend beyond even choral and contemporary music. According to the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills framework, “modern-day problems demand a full range of...creativity skills” (p. 14). Heterophony requires creativity, innovation, collaboration (in a sense, collaborative individuality) and spontaneous decision-making in a fast-paced environment. If these skills seem familiar, it is because they are vital, now more than ever. Heterophonic musical thinking is essentially 21st century thinking, and choral directors can help build a mindset for young singers that prepares them for our dynamic world.



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