

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:                   TEACHING SIGHT-READING TO  
UNDERGRADUATE CHORAL ENSEMBLE  
SINGERS: LESSONS FROM SUCCESSFUL  
LEARNERS

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This study was designed to investigate professional choral singers' training, perceptions on the importance of sight-reading skill in their work, and thoughts on effective pedagogy for teaching sight-reading to undergraduate choral ensemble singers. Participants in this study (N=48) included self-selected professional singers and choral conductors from the Summer 2015 Oregon Bach Festival's Berwick Chorus and conducting Master Class. Data were gathered from questionnaire responses and audio recorded focus group sessions.

Focus group data showed that the majority of participants developed proficiency in their sight-reading skills from instrumental study, aural skills classes, and through on-the-job training at a church job or other professional choral singing employment. While participants brought up a number of important job skills, sight-

reading was listed as perhaps the single most important skill that a professional choral singer could develop.

When reading music during the rehearsal process, the data revealed two main strategies that professional singers used to interpret the pitches in their musical line: an intervallic approach and a harmonic approach. Participants marked their scores systematically to identify problem spots and leave reminders to aid with future readings, such as marking intervals, solfege syllables, or rhythmic counts. Participants reported using a variety of skills other than score marking to try to accurately find their pitches, such as looking at other vocal or instrumental lines, looking ahead, and using knowledge about a musical style or time period to make more intuitive “guesses” when sight-reading. Participants described using additional approaches when sight-reading in an audition situation, including scanning for anchors or anomalies and positive self-talk. Singers learned these sight-reading techniques from a variety of sources.

Participants had many different ideas about how best to teach sight-reading in the undergraduate choral ensemble rehearsal. The top response was that sight-reading needed to be practiced consistently in order for students to improve. Other responses included developing personal accountability, empowering students, combining different teaching methods, and discussing real-life applications of becoming strong sight-readers. There was discussion about the ultimate purpose of choir at the university level and whether it is to teach musicianship skills or produce excellent performances.



TEACHING SIGHT-READING  
TO UNDERGRADUATE CHORAL ENSEMBLE SINGERS:  
LESSONS FROM SUCCESSFUL LEARNERS

by

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

One of the goals of higher education is to prepare students to build a career in their chosen field upon graduation.<sup>1</sup> For many vocal performance majors, professional choral work is an important component of the work load during and after college, whether it is in the form of a section leader or paid choir member of a church, synagogue, opera chorus, military chorus, community chorus, semi-professional, or professional chorus. Many important vocal and personal characteristics are required to succeed as a professional choral singer. Of these, sight-reading, or the ability to accurately read music at first sight, is perhaps the most important skill, because a strong sight-reader will be able to learn music quickly and adjust to the needs of the conductor in a limited time-frame.<sup>2</sup> Despite the importance of being able to sight-read proficiently, many ensemble singers graduate without developing this skill to a level high enough to succeed in the professional choral world.<sup>3</sup>

### **Need for the Study**

While some studies have been undertaken in K-12 choral classrooms to address the problem of how to teach sight-reading, there is little published research that addresses how best to teach choral ensemble singers in general and almost none focuses on teaching ensemble students at the undergraduate level. The problem of inadequate training appears in the literature throughout the twentieth and twenty-first

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<sup>1</sup> Jeanne L. Higbee and Patricia L. Dwinell, "Educating Students About the Purpose of Higher Education," *Research and Teaching in Developmental Education* 14, no. 1 (Fall 1997), 76.

<sup>2</sup> Deanna Joseph, "The Changing Paradigm of Professional Singing: A Conversation with Top Singers and Conductors in the United States," *Choral Journal* 56, no. 5 (December 2015), 29.

<sup>3</sup> Edward P. Asmus, Jr., "Music Teaching and Music Literacy," *Journal of Music Teacher Education* 13, no. 2 (Spring 2004), 6-8.

centuries; yet there does not seem to have been much headway made in resolving the issue. A 1979 article from the *Music Educators Journal* states, “Most college-level theory courses do not prepare singers for a high level of sight-reading skill. Choral directors too often play individual voice parts, thus depriving singers of valuable opportunities to practice reading”<sup>4</sup> and Demorest’s 2001 book on teaching sight-reading in the K-12 choral rehearsal states, “There is almost universal agreement on the importance of teaching musical literacy as a means to musical independence. Few conductors would argue against including sight-singing as a part of choral music education, but surveys of choral directors have found that while many favor sight-singing instruction, few devote significant rehearsal time to teaching it.”<sup>5</sup>

There appears to be a lack of literature concerning the importance of sight-reading in the larger choral community, particularly when discussing skill sets for professional choirs. In a search to find assessments of its importance as a component of choral music skills, mostly what is found is an occasional sentence stating that the sight-reading component of an audition is not necessarily a major one, although these statements are unsupported by any systematic studies. In a 1998 article from the *Choral Journal* on what to expect when auditioning for a professional choir, the author writes, “Some groups ask for a sight singing experience; however, the examples shown are very reasonable for any qualified musician. Practicing with the Ottman *Music for Sight Singing* text adequately prepares the auditionee.”<sup>6</sup> A 2014

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<sup>4</sup> Patricia Welting Hollahan, “Nice Voices Are a Dime a Dozen,” *Music Educators Journal* 66, no. 2 (October 1979), 55.

<sup>5</sup> Steven M. Demorest, *Building Choral Excellence: Teaching Sight-Singing in the Choral Rehearsal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Jerry A. Young, “I Can Actually Make a Living? A look at selected military and orchestral choral singing opportunities and auditions,” *Choral Journal* 39, no. 4 (November 1998), 50-51.

Chorus America blog post reveals that in an informal interview, conductors' responses on the importance of sight-reading "ranged from 'It is very, very important' to 'It's a nice perk, but not necessary for the job.'"<sup>7</sup> It is noteworthy that the literature contains such a range of opinions about the importance of sight-reading, given that music literacy is tested in at least 50% of high school state choral music festivals.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, anyone who is currently auditioning on the professional circuit knows that the sight-reading skill is a critical part of most, if not all, professional choral auditions. No previous studies have targeted this unique and highly-skilled population of high-level professional choral singers. I believe that these singers' methods and approaches to rehearsing and performing large amounts of music successfully in short periods of time could provide important insight into how choral educators might prepare pre-professional students for this task.

### *The Decline of Sight-Reading in the United States*

The problem of how to teach sight-reading and music literacy is not a new one; American music educators have been struggling with how to do so for more than two and a half centuries.<sup>9</sup> The English colonists brought a movable *do* based solmization (solfege<sup>10</sup>) system to the United States known as tonic *sol-fa*. Unlike solfege systems that use seven unique syllables: *do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, and ti*, the tonic *sol-fa* system uses only four: *fa, sol, la, and mi*. An ascending scale in the tonic *sol-fa*

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<sup>7</sup> Kelsey Menehan, "How Important is Sight-Singing?" *Chorus America*. March 13, 2014, Accessed September 18, 2015, <https://www.chorusamerica.org/singers/how-important-sight-singing>.

<sup>8</sup> Charles E. Norris, "A Nationwide Overview of Sight-Singing Requirements of Large-Group Choral Festivals," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 52, no. 1 (Spring 2004), 23.

<sup>9</sup> Linda G. Davenport, "American Instruction in Sight-Singing: Then and Now," *The Bulletin of Historical Research in Music Education* 13, no. 2 (July 1992), 90.

<sup>10</sup> Participants in this study referred to solmization syllables by the French term "solfege," so solfege will be used in the remainder of the paper.

system would therefore use the four syllables in the following order: *fa, sol, la, fa, sol, la, mi, fa*. The intervals *la-fa* and *mi-fa* were always half-steps and all other intervals in the scale were whole steps, so this system aided intervallic reading, just like it does in movable *do*.<sup>11</sup> The tonic *sol-fa* system is also called shape-note singing because the shape of the note-head changes depending on the associated solfege syllable. The most famous publication printed using this system is *The Sacred Harp*, published in 1844 by B.F. White and E.J. King, during a time of great growth in the music education system of the South.<sup>12</sup> This method of singing is still in use today, but over time it was considered “old-fashioned” and replaced by movable *do*, fixed *do*, and other systems. It is now used only in some Southern churches and traditional early American shape-note singing groups and is virtually unknown in educational systems.<sup>13</sup>

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in American history, there was a focus in music education to teach children and adults to be able to read and sing congregational hymns in church services, so music literacy and sight-reading skill were given priority in the educational system. Ministers organized the first singing schools in Massachusetts in the 1720s and their success at improving congregational singing led to further development of singing schools throughout New England by the late eighteenth century.<sup>14</sup> The students learned rhythmic notation and modes of time (the equivalent of modern time signatures) in addition to key signatures and basic elements of theory. Some early nineteenth century books include interval training and

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<sup>11</sup> Davenport, 99.

<sup>12</sup> Kenneth H. Phillips, “Sight Singing: Where Have We Been? Where Are We Going?” *Choral Journal* 24, no. 6 (February 1984), 12.

<sup>13</sup> Phillips, 13.

<sup>14</sup> Davenport, 93.

vocalises or voice training exercises called “lessons for tuning the voice.”<sup>15</sup> While it is hard to create a complete picture of the extent of musical training in eighteenth and nineteenth century America, it is clear that there was a strong emphasis on music literacy and a cohesive singing culture reinforced by regular congregational singing in local churches. When did this change in America and what was the cause?

In the 1840s, urban centers of the Northeastern United States began to embrace the seven-syllable system used in the more “cultured” European cities and put aside the shape-note singing instruction books. Lowell Mason founded the Boston Academy of Music in 1832 and published a *Manual of Instruction* two years later that espoused the belief that students should perform music before learning about written notes or theory. Phillips calls this method the “rote to note” movement which was in complete contrast to the singing-school method that taught note reading before sound production.<sup>16</sup> This difference of approaches in music education sparked a debate that has continued to the present day. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Luther Whiting Mason published a music series in 1870 that saw the music program as a relief from other studies and therefore did not emphasize music reading. In response, Hosea Holt published a music course in 1883 with tiered sight-reading exercises to promote music literacy.<sup>17</sup> Other methods differed about what solfege system to use: tonic *sol-fa*, movable *do*, or fixed *do*; a heated debate on that topic continues in music education today.

After World War I, instrumental music became more popular, to the detriment of choral music. Solfege syllables began to be replaced by note letter names and

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<sup>15</sup> Davenport, 100.

<sup>16</sup> Phillips, 14.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 13.

numbers in order to relate more closely to instrumental music playing. Also, the culture in the United States has continued to diversify over the past 200 years. Urban communities in particular are made up of many varied ethnic groups and religious backgrounds, many of which do not gather together regularly to sing. There is even controversy among music educators to this day about the goals of music education and whether or not strong music literacy should be a major goal of music education. Many music educators over the course of the twentieth century have advocated for better music literacy and sight-reading training for their students, but time restraints and the pressure of a saturated curriculum and performance schedule have made it challenging for music teachers to build strong sight-reading skills. As Phillips says, “Whether music educators employ movable ‘do,’ fixed ‘do,’ numbers, letters, etc., the challenge of teaching music reading remains today a major problem. Whatever the system employed, the goal of producing a musically literate society is far from being met.”<sup>18</sup>

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate professional choral singers’ perceptions of a) the importance of sight-reading skills and b) effective pedagogy for teaching sight-reading to undergraduate choral ensemble singers. A questionnaire and focus group method were employed. This study is the first to seek out the opinions of the contemporary professional choral singing population in America on the subjects of how they use sight-reading in their work and how they think we should best teach sight-reading. The goal of this exploratory study was to begin to answer some of

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 16.



these questions in a smaller population of professional singers and to lay the groundwork for future studies. It is hoped that by exploring the sight-reading methods of successful choral singers, conductors and teachers can learn what methods might work best for pre-professional choral ensemble singers and can then prioritize those approaches in their teaching.

### Study Questions

The focus group questions fell under two broad categories; how these professionals use sight-reading in their work and how music educators could best teach sight-reading to undergraduate ensemble singers. Four larger questions were formed (two under each broader category) with possible follow-up questions written beneath them.

**Question 1.** What elements in your musical training prepared you for what you have to do as a professional choral singer?

How important is learning to sight-read? (alternately: You all mentioned sight-reading. Why is sight-reading so important?)

When did you learn to sight-read proficiently as a singer? How easily did it come to you?

**Question 2.** I'm interested in how professional singers think about and use sight-reading in the rehearsal process. What sight-reading techniques do you incorporate into your professional singing?

If you are asked to sight-read something at an audition, what process do you use?

Let's say you are in a professional choral rehearsal and you keep missing a note in a specific passage. The conductor runs that passage two more times to fix an unrelated problem. Can you talk about what strategies you use in the subsequent run-throughs to accurately find and sing that note?

Where did you learn these particular strategies that you are describing? If you learned them on your own, how did you do it?

**Question 3.** Do you teach sight-reading to your students? How did you decide on a methodology for teaching? What resources do you use?

Do you believe that advanced sight-reading skills can be taught?

Some students succeed at sight-reading quickly while others struggle. What do you think accounts for this disparity? What do you do to help those students who are struggling?

Describe the differences in teaching in group situations versus one on one.

**Question 4.** How do you think we should teach sight-reading to undergraduate choral singers in rehearsal settings? What skills do you think are the most important/ useful?

What about beginners? What about students on a professional track?

Describe the connection between musicianship skills and success. Can you be successful without them?

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter is divided into two sections of literature about sight-reading: literature about professional choirs and professional choral singers and literature about sight-reading studies. Due to the scope of this project, the review of literature focuses primarily on college choral sight-reading studies and some relevant high school choral studies, excluding studies involving middle school or younger aged singers and instrumental sight-reading studies.

### **Professional Choirs and Professional Choral Singers**

There is very little published literature on the growth of professional choirs in the United States, but there is a 1990 interview in the *Choral Journal* by Dennis Schrock with three notable pioneers of American professional chorus leadership: Vance George (San Francisco Symphony Chorus), Michael Korn (The Philadelphia Singers), and Dale Warland (The Dale Warland Singers.) In addition, Matthew Sigman wrote a series of two articles for the 2010 volume of Chorus America's *The Voice*. The first article, "The Rise of the Professional Chorus" discusses the mid-twentieth century origins of the professional chorus and the formation of America's earliest professional choirs and the second article, "A Professional Chorus by Any Other Name," details the evolution of the "modern" professional chorus of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century.

#### *What is a Professional Choir?*

At its most basic level, a professional choir is an organization where at least some of the singers are paid for their work, but the term connotes more than that.

Conductors George, Korn, and Warland define a professional choir as a place where the “singers are paid and also that performance quality is of a certain high level,” that the choirs “are fully prepared and musically competent” and that “the professional choir is comprised of ‘professionally trained’ singers, i.e. singers who have advanced technical skills, vocal maturity, and musical polish.”<sup>19</sup> The first *Chorus America* article says, “The lines between fully-professional, semi-professional, and all-volunteer ensembles may be similar in basic organizational structure, but to conductors and professional singers the distinctions among them are great, variously touching on aspects of commitment, rigorous preparedness, competency, and quality.” Earl Rivers (Cincinnati’s Vocal Arts Ensemble) says, “With a professional chorus rehearsals are not teaching sessions... they are for balancing, listening, tuning, and pacing,” suggesting that professional choirs move more quickly to higher levels of music-making than volunteer choirs. Conductor Alice Parker says, “A professional singer is a person who has decided to make singing the primary activity of life... The singer defines his or her profession by life choice.”<sup>20</sup>

### *History of the Professional Choir*

Vance George links the development of the professional choir to its affiliation with professional orchestras around the country. In the first half of the twentieth century, “orchestras had no affiliated choirs so they engaged college and community ensembles for their choral orchestral performances... In the mid 50’s, stemming from the professional success of Robert Shaw, Margaret Hillis, and Roger Wagner,

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<sup>19</sup> Dennis Schrock, “An Interview with Vance George, Michael Korn, and Dale Warland: Professional Choirs,” *Choral Journal* 30, no. 7 (February 1990): 5-6.

<sup>20</sup> Matthew Sigman, “A Professional Chorus by Any Other Name,” *Voice of Chorus America* 33, no. 4 (Summer 2010):28-29.

orchestras began to form and financially support their own choirs.”<sup>21</sup> In the 1950s and 1960s, symphony choruses began to form, and over time, some of the singers began to be paid for their work with these choruses.

Michael Korn states that the Association of Professional Vocal Ensembles (APVE) was the first organization developed specifically for the unique needs of professional choirs. APVE was founded in 1977 because Korn and Gregg Smith (founder of the Gregg Smith Singers) were lamenting that their professional choirs could not receive grants from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) because there was not a “professional choir” category to which they could apply. Korn traveled throughout the United States to record professional choral activity and to build this first unifying organization. APVE changed its name to “Chorus America” in June of 1987, to more clearly define the ensembles it represented. In the 1990 interview, Korn says that Chorus America “promotes the professional quality and growth of vocal ensembles, stimulates further development or remuneration for singers, and encourages greater understanding, appreciation, and enjoyment of choral music by all segments of American society.”<sup>22</sup> He notes that, based on the number of voting members in the organization, around forty-five professional choral ensembles formed in the United States between 1970-1990.

In the *Voice of Chorus America* article “The Rise of the Professional Chorus,” Ann Meier Baker, president and CEO of Chorus America is quoted as follows: “One of the first accomplishments of APVE was to convince the National Endowment for the Arts that choruses were deserving of its support. Since then the NEA’s investment

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<sup>21</sup> Schrock, 10.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

in choruses has continued to expand, helping them in a variety of ways.”<sup>23</sup> No doubt this financial help in the form of NEA grants encouraged the development of more professional choirs in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

### *Professional Choirs and Sight-Reading*

Sight-reading skill is not mentioned in two of these articles on the development of the professional chorus and is only mentioned once in passing in the third. In “The Rise of the Professional Chorus,” Charles Bruffy, conductor of the Kansas City and Phoenix Chorales, is quoted as saying, “Professional singers have reading skills that allow us to work at a velocity not possible with volunteer singers... And they have developed techniques such that a conductor can depend on replication.”<sup>24</sup> For the most part, the skill set of the professional singer is not discussed in these articles as it is outside of their main focus on the history and development of the professional choir in the United States.

Soprano and professional choral singer Kathryn Mueller published two articles in the 2013 issue of the *Classical Singer* titled “A Wide New World: Professional Choral Singing” and “Breaking into the Pro Choral World.” These articles go into more detail about the skill set needed to succeed as a professional choral singer. Mueller begins the second article with, “Most singers agree on the common things conductors and administrators are looking for: solid technique,

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<sup>23</sup> Sigman, 27.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 29.

excellent sight-reading skills, flexibility, professionalism, and the ability to get along with others.”<sup>25</sup>

In the first article, Mueller quotes contralto Emily Marvosh saying, “My sight-reading skills are constantly being honed... I have learned to absorb and interpret a huge amount of repertoire in a short amount of time.”<sup>26</sup> Mueller also mentions that professional choral singers have “excellent intonation and the ability to blend and make a variety of sounds.”<sup>27</sup> Other singers quoted in the article state that professional choral singing has advanced their musicianship skills, language fluency, diction, knowledge of musical periods and styles, familiarity with masterworks in the choral repertoire, and the ability to produce varied vocal colors. They say that many of these skills transfer readily into their work as professional soloists as well. Mueller mentions that professional choral work also frequently furthers choral and solo careers, due to the vast potential for networking.<sup>28</sup>

If sight-reading skills need to be developed further, Mueller recommends on-the-job training, even if the singer begins in unpaid positions. The singer may want to begin with a volunteer church job or community chorus position, move up to a paid church job and regional choir work, and eventually audition for higher-level national ensembles.

The *Choral Journal* recently published an article that advocates unequivocally for the value of sight-reading skill in professional singing. Deanna Joseph’s article,

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<sup>25</sup> Kathryn Mueller, “Breaking into the Pro Choral World,” *Classical Singer* 26, no. 8 (October 2013): 54.

<sup>26</sup> Kathryn Mueller, “A Wide New World: Professional Choral Singing,” *Classical Singer* 26, no. 7 (September 2013): 72.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

“The Changing Paradigm of Professional Singing: A Conversation with Top Singers and Conductors in the United States,” published in the December 2015 issue of the *Choral Journal*, interviews four nationally and internationally acclaimed conductors of professional choirs and five of the nation’s and world’s top professional choral singers.

In the article, all four conductors mention the importance of sight-reading in their interviews, but it is only mentioned explicitly by one of the five singers. The singers talk about other important job skills, such as being flexible, versatile, kind, easy to work with, and being able to manage money. However, sight-reading skills are brought up mostly by the conductors.

Conductor Simon Halsey mentions “good sight-reading” as one of eleven listed qualities that make a singer marketable.<sup>29</sup> Conductor Simon Carrington says, “the essential skills include: musicianship, sight-reading skills (it is critically important to be not only a good reader but a very quick and fearless reader), highly developed ensemble skills (the equal to those of a member of an accomplished string quartet), an unassuming sensitivity to the musicians around you, and a natural and easy collegiality.”<sup>30</sup> Conductor Craig Hella Johnson comments, “It is necessary that the singer have a depth of the fundamental musicianship skills: superb sight-reading, consistent intonation, great rhythm, agility, and a broad color spectrum. But equally important is that a singer has what I call a ‘chamber music sensibility’ – a set of skills and experience in making music with others at a very high level.”<sup>31</sup> Conductor Josh Habermann mentions, “I prioritize excellent musicianship right along with vocal

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<sup>29</sup> Joseph, 26.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.



quality. There are so many fine singers now of every voice type that what distinguishes one from another is often the ability to read something perfectly the first time. In many professional situations, even at the very highest levels, there isn't any time to waste."<sup>32</sup>

One of the interview questions asks how conductors teaching at the university level can better prepare young singers to have fulfilling and profitable careers in the field. Habermann mentions the importance of connecting undergraduate experiences and training to skills that will be expected in the professional world. He says:

“Conductors need to talk to young singers about the opportunities that exist beyond the traditional opera path and help them make the connection between the skills required in the choral experience and undergraduate music curriculum, and those expected in the professional world. An 8:00 a.m. ear training class, for example, can be a tough sell to a college freshman who sees no purpose beyond fulfilling a degree requirement. We have to change that mind-set to make it clear that those skills are the building blocks without which professional employment in music is unlikely.”<sup>33</sup>

Soprano Kathryn Lewek suggests, “take one rehearsal a week and just read through new music, challenging the choir of young singers to make music while they are sight-reading... Several things might come from this: better sight-reading skills (I cannot stress enough the importance of this), more individual artistic decision making, more communication between leader and ensemble, more communication between singers within the ensemble, and a low-stress situation in which to experiment.”<sup>34</sup>

Mueller's and Joseph's articles form a solid foundation for the skill set and the training needed to work as a modern professional choral singer. However, both

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 29-30.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

authors interviewed only a small number of professionals in the field, so more qualitative and quantitative data would need to be collected to draw stronger conclusions about the shared experience and skill set necessarily to train and work as a professional choral singer.

## **Sight-Reading Studies**

### *Choosing a Consistent Method*

Sight-reading research is a relatively young field. In the past twenty-five years or so, researchers have started exploring the most effective pedagogical approaches to teaching sight-reading, mostly in secondary school music classrooms. Jane Kuehne's "Sight-Singing: Ten Years of Published Research" reviews sight-reading research from 1998-2008 and concludes that "teachers should choose a method, use it consistently, and teach their students to prepare effectively."<sup>35</sup>

There has been much controversy for centuries over the "best" sight-reading methodology to use in teaching and the debate continues today. Whether a music educator chooses movable "do," fixed "do," numbers, note names, or some other method, what seems more important than what method is chosen is that the students are exposed to a consistent method from course to course and, perhaps most importantly, that their educators are enthusiastic about the teaching of sight-reading. Demorest says:

"No one method has emerged as superior in either process or result. The answer to the music-reading dilemma does not seem to lie with a particular method or approach. Perhaps it lies instead with teachers who believe in the

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<sup>35</sup> Jane M. Kuehne, "Sight-Singing: Ten Years of Published Research," *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education* 29, no. 1 (November 2010): 7.

importance of sight-singing and who teach it every day through whatever means they deem most effective.”<sup>36</sup>

Kuehne’s overview of sight-singing research indicates that an instructor’s chosen method or materials “may not be of single importance. It may be just as important to use them consistently with students.”<sup>37</sup>

### *Experimental Studies*

A number of experimental studies have been conducted in secondary school classrooms in particular. The authors of the various studies were usually informed by the results of the studies that came before them, so these studies will be presented in chronological order.

May’s 1993 dissertation was one of the earliest investigations into sight-reading teaching practices at the high school level. He created a questionnaire that investigated sight-reading systems, methods, and amount of class time used for sight-reading in 192 Texas high schools. He found that movable “do” and the “relative minor” methods were most popular in his sample and that roughly 75% of respondents reported rehearsing sight-reading between 30 and 36 weeks of the school year and 4 or 5 days a week for 10-20 minutes. A number of sight-reading resources were reported, including performance octavos, individual contest octavos, self-composed materials, hymnals, Bach chorales, and method books. This study is cited in most subsequent studies and seems to have sparked an interest in further research.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Demorest, 19.

<sup>37</sup> Kuehne, 12.

<sup>38</sup> John A. May, “A Description of Current Practices in the Teaching of Choral Melody Reading in the High Schools of Texas,” (PhD diss., University of Houston, 1993), 51-60, accessed October 21, 2015, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

Demorest and May (1995) examined individual sight-reading skills of choir members in relation to a number of musical factors including the student's private musical training and choral experience, the difficulty of the melodic material, and the system used in their school's group sight-reading instruction. Students from two Texas high schools sight-read two melodies of different difficulties individually in a practice room with a tape player. A thirty second preparatory period was given before each exercise. Students were also given questionnaires about their musical backgrounds. The strongest correlations with proficient sight-reading skill were the number of years of school choral experience followed by the number of years of piano study, instrumental study, and voice lessons.

Three years later, Demorest (1998) conducted a study on beginning and advanced choral singers from six high schools in the state of Washington to explore the effect of individualized testing on sight-reading development. An experimental group of students was given three individual sight-reading tests throughout one semester in addition to the full-group sight-reading instruction that was given to both the experimental and control groups. It was found that the experimental group's individual sight-reading scores advanced more rapidly than did those of the control group. These results formed the basis of Demorest's 2001 book, *Building Choral Excellence: Teaching Sight-Singing in the Choral Rehearsal*, where he elaborates on ways to incorporate individual sight-reading assessment into the choral rehearsal using a recording device in another room. In this way, students can be regularly assessed and held accountable for their individual sight-reading advancement without the teacher having to administer these assessments individually. Demorest followed

up this research with a 2004 article, “Choral Sight-Singing Practices: Revisiting a Web-Based Survey” and included ninety-four additional middle and high school choral directors in his survey about current practices in teaching sight-reading. His results showed that movable “do” was perhaps becoming more popular among secondary school teachers and that there is little agreement on a system for rhythm reading or for sight-reading materials. Teachers preparing their students for contests that include a sight-reading component to their assessment were more likely to include regular sight-reading in their teaching.

Henry (2001) developed an individualized vocal sight-reading assessment tool called the “Vocal Sight-Reading Inventory” (VSRI) to aid in collecting consistent data when assessing choral student sight-reading skills. This tool was used in subsequent sight-reading studies to collect reliable data and no other data collection tool seems to have replaced it in recent years. Three years later, Henry (2004) used parts of the VSRI to study targeted pitch skills for sight-singing instruction in the choral rehearsal. In this study, Henry explored whether or not emphasizing specific pitch skills based on scale degree and harmonic function affected sight-reading success. She selected fifteen of the easiest pitch patterns established in the VSRI. These patterns included repeated pitches, ascending and descending scalar motion, skips and leaps within the tonic, dominant, and sub-dominant triads, and cadential patterns. After a sight-reading pretest, beginning level choral students from a Texas high school were split into two groups and taught these fifteen pitch skills over the course of twelve weeks. One group was taught using newly composed melodic material meant to emphasize each pitch skill task and one group was taught using

familiar melodies that emphasized the same skills. Both groups scored significantly higher on their sight-reading post-test, indicating that targeting these skills through either newly composed or familiar material could benefit students' sight-reading skill.

Killian and Henry (2005) explored successful and unsuccessful strategies in individual sight-singing preparation and performance. In their study, 198 high school singers sight-read two melodies with and without a thirty-second practice opportunity beforehand. These thirty-second practice opportunities were recorded on video and student behavior was evaluated and correlated to overall success in the subsequent sight-reading example. Killian and Henry concluded that the high scorers tonicized or vocally established the key, used hand signs, sang out loud during practice, physically kept the beat, finished practicing the melody within thirty seconds, and isolated problem areas. Low scorers were more likely to abandon the steady beat, stop while reading the melody, take their eyes off the music, and shift their body. High scorers were more likely to have sung in all-state, all-area, or all-region choirs, taken private voice and/ or piano lessons, played an instrument, played in an instrumental ensemble, sight-sung individually outside of class, and had a director who gave individual sight-singing tests. The thirty-second practice time significantly helped the high scorers but made less of a difference in the low scorers, perhaps because they did not know how to use the allotted time efficiently. This study indicates that low-level sight-readers could benefit from being taught some of the skills employed by the high-level sight-readers in this study. This hypothesis was tested by Henry in her 2008 study and it was found that low level sight-readers improve when they are taught to tonicize, use hand signs, practice out loud, keep the beat physically,

complete the entire melody during the allotted practice time, isolate trouble spots, skip easy parts, and set a steady tempo.

Floyd and Bradley (2006) investigated the teaching strategies of secondary school choral directors whose choirs received the highest possible score in the sight-reading portion of the 2004 Kentucky district performance evaluation. Twenty-four out of a possible forty-six choral directors whose choirs received a “distinguished” score participated in the study. A sixteen question survey was administered over the phone in order to gather data about how these directors taught sight-reading in the rehearsal process, what sight-reading systems and resources were used, how directors were trained to teach sight-reading, other exercises used by the directors that developed sight-reading skill, and the directors’ perceptions on whether or not sight-reading preparation enhanced music reading skills and intonation in their choirs. The authors found that the directors used a combination of materials to teach sight-reading, usually method books and self-made materials, and that they devoted an average of 18% of rehearsal time to sight-reading each day, usually at the beginning of the rehearsal period. Many of the directors commented that after several years of sight-reading training, it takes their choirs less rehearsal time to learn new music. 75% of the participants reported using the movable “do” pitch system and none reported using fixed “do,” neutral syllables, or letter names exclusively. This indicates that pitch systems that included an element of pitch function, such as movable “do,” were more widely used in this population sample than systems that did not relate to tonality or key, such as fixed “do.” Two-thirds of the directors used pitch activities other than sight-reading exercises that built sight-reading skills, such as a

pitch ladder. 79% of directors reported giving individual sight-reading assessments to their students and directors reported that sight-reading training improved music reading skills and intonation in their choirs. The authors noted that the majority of choral directors in their sample did not find that their undergraduate studies prepared them fully to teach sight-reading to their choirs and instead found that professional development training through the Kentucky Music Educators Association (KMEA) was more helpful in preparing them to teach sight-reading.<sup>39</sup>

Fine, Berry, and Rosner (2006) asked twenty-two experienced college-aged singers to sight-read novel Bach chorales, some of which had been manipulated harmonically, melodically, or both. They found that alterations in either melody or harmony increased pitch errors in sight-reading, suggesting that pattern recognition and prediction are important components of sight-reading skill. Singers who did better in an initial interval-singing assessment were better able to manage melodic and harmonic alterations in the Bach chorales than singers who initially read intervals more poorly.

McClung (2008) found that there is no significant difference in sight-reading ability with or without the use of Curwen hand signs in high school singers who had extensive training in movable solfege syllables and Curwen hand signs. When using hand signs, study participants with instrumental experience performed much better than participants without instrumental training, perhaps due to the kinesthetic skills inherent in instrumental playing and hand signs.

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<sup>39</sup> Eva Floyd and Kelly D. Bradley, "Teaching Strategies Related to Successful Sight-Singing in Kentucky Choral Ensembles," *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education* 25, no. 1 (Fall-Winter 2006): 75-78.



Henry (2011) explored the relationship between simultaneous pitch and rhythm tasks in 252 high school singers and found that rhythmic success was significantly related to pitch success. Singers were more likely to prioritize pitch over rhythm, performing pitch accurately at the expense of rhythmic accuracy. Participants with piano or other instrumental background were more likely to be able to accurately perform pitches and rhythms together.

Henry (2015) explored 138 high school students' reactions to computer technology used for individual vocal sight-reading assessment. Students sight-read three musical lines and were graded by a beta version of SmartMusic 2012. Students did not respond favorably to this technology, citing the inability to set their own tempo as their primary concern. However, after students were allowed to interact with the software and become more familiar with it, most of them saw the benefits and potential for independent practice. Computer technology could provide an easier way for students to practice sight-reading independently and for teachers and conductors to assess students individually, but the students cited that they wished that they had been given more instruction about the program's various features and time to develop comfort with the program before being placed in a high-pressure testing situation.

### **Summary**

A number of authors have prioritized scientifically-based sight-reading research in order to systematically survey teachers and students and test different approaches to the teaching of sight-reading. While this area of research is still relatively young and the body of research needs to grow and continue to be tested in the coming years, some conclusions can be drawn. Results show that the specific

sight-reading method taught does not seem to matter as much as consistent and regular practice using that method and the instructor's comfort with and enthusiasm about teaching that method. It is helpful if the method remains consistent from course to course and from year to year as the student advances in study, as having to learn a brand new system can feel like starting over and can set the student back mentally and psychologically.

It is important that sight-reading is practiced regularly in the choral rehearsal in order for students to build their skills and become more confident in their sight-reading abilities. Teachers and students who report practicing sight-reading in every rehearsal are much more likely to succeed in sight-reading assessments.

Almost as important as regular sight-reading practice, teachers can build sight-reading success by teaching students how to prepare for sight-reading assessments. In individual assessments and auditions, singers are almost always given a short period of time to prepare. Studies show that students perform better when they are taught skills to employ during this preparatory time that will help them succeed in the subsequent sight-reading assessment. Teachers can help facilitate this process by teaching students these skills directly.

Finally, it is clear that training on an instrument is strongly correlated to vocal sight-reading success. Teachers can encourage students to study an instrument, especially if they are considering a career in vocal performance.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this project was to investigate professional choral singers' perceptions of a) the importance of sight-reading skills and b) effective pedagogy for teaching sight-reading to undergraduate choral ensemble singers. I explored the teaching of sight-reading strategies through a review of relevant literature and by leading a series of focus groups with professional choral singers and choral conductors. I chose to conduct focus groups in conjunction with the 2015 Oregon Bach Festival, as high-level professional choral singers and choral conductors from across the nation and the world gathered there for a three-week period, facilitating the creation of in-person focus groups. In these focus groups, I investigated how professionals trained to become professional choral singers, how they use sight-reading in their work, and what they think are the best ways to teach sight-reading to undergraduate choral ensemble singers.

### **Researcher Role**

After completing my bachelor's degree in Vocal Performance and my master's degree in Choral Conducting, I began taking auditions and singing with professional choirs, both locally and around the country. I was surprised when I was first hired for the Santa Fe Desert Chorale summer festival at age 24. I felt young and inexperienced, but attributed my success to my strong sight-reading abilities in the audition. Over the next few years, I took many more auditions and was largely successful at passing auditions and getting hired for these national professional choral groups.

I compared my success with that of a number of my peers who were unable to audition successfully into the national professional choral circuit, despite possessing similar training and background to my own. For some reason, my first semester of music theory and aural skills in college had “connected the dots” for me and I felt like I was able to sight-read at a much higher level after that point. I know that that was not the case for some of my peers and I wondered why. I wondered what was different about my background that made me so immediately receptive to the way that college theory and aural skills were taught and what the school or the educators could have done differently to help bring some of my classmates up to the same level upon graduation.

I believe that advanced sight-reading skills were crucial to my success as a professional choral singer. In my role as researcher, I sought out other professional choral singers’ perceptions and beliefs and tried to remain as unbiased as possible in the design of the focus group questions and in my interactions with group participants.

### **Pilot Study**

I conducted a pilot study on May 15, 2015 with seven DMA conducting graduate students at the University of Maryland to determine if my questionnaires and focus group questions were clear and to practice moderating a focus group. I distributed the questionnaires after most of the pilot study participants had gathered and then began the focus group session. Changes following pilot testing included distributing questionnaires in advance of focus group sessions to save time and reframing Question One’s follow-up questions to focus on when participants began to

sight-read proficiently rather than their earliest childhood memories of learning to read music.

### **Population**

Participants in this study (N=48) were selected using an opportunistic criterion sampling method<sup>40</sup> and included professional singers and choral conductors from the Summer 2015 Oregon Bach Festival's Berwick Chorus, as well as professional and student choral conductors from the Oregon Bach Festival's conducting Master Class. This population consisted of professional singers, choral conductors, and music educators, all of whom had previously auditioned for the Oregon Bach Festival and had been invited to participate in the Summer 2015 season. Participating in the Berwick Chorus is a professional choral engagement, so all members of the Berwick Chorus were considered professional choral singers for the purposes of this study, regardless of whether or not they also sang in professional choirs outside of the Berwick Chorus. The seven choral conductors who participated in the study were invited to participate regardless of whether or not they self-identified as professional singers.

#### *Background Information on Oregon Bach Festival Participants*

Participants in this study included professional singers and choral conductors from the Oregon Bach Festival's Berwick Chorus as well as professional and student choral conductors from the Oregon Bach Festival's conducting Master Class. While the Berwick Chorus singers perform many different kinds of music and styles at the

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<sup>40</sup> Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldaña, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014), 32.

Oregon Bach Festival (in 2015, they performed choral works by Bach, Haydn, Bruckner, Mahler, and Pärt), the festival was dedicated originally to the performance of the music of Bach. The singers are expected to be extremely versatile and to be able to shift seamlessly among all performing styles – Renaissance, Baroque, Classic, Romantic, and Contemporary. Most music festivals do not place such varied demands on their singers, but with the constantly changing state of the economy, festivals have begun to program strategically to appeal to all audiences. Singers of the Berwick Chorus are usually selected based on their ability to blend or lighten the voice for early music styles and extra singers are added for works that require a louder or fuller sound. Some opera singers audition and perform in the Berwick Chorus, but they must be comfortable switching into a lighter choral style.

Another notable feature of the Oregon Bach Festival is its emphasis on education through the conducting Master Class. There has been a Master Class component to the festival for decades, where conductors can apply to study with a master clinician and teacher of Bach. This educational aspect of the festival appeals to educators and choral conductors around the country, so many of these musicians audition and sing with the Berwick Chorus and are inspired and re-energized in their teaching by collaborating with the conducting Master Class students. The fact that the festival occurs during the summer months makes it especially feasible for music educators who operate on an academic calendar. While the Berwick Chorus is composed of a number of professional singers who are not educators, there is an unusually high number of singers who are also choral conductors and educators.

### *Audition Process for the Oregon Bach Festival*

In order to audition for the Berwick Chorus, singers first submitted an audio recording of arias and vocalises to the Oregon Bach Festival. If the singer was invited to participate in the festival, they would have a live re-audition in Oregon during their first summer festival. During the re-audition, singers are asked to sing an aria, vocalize throughout the range, speak a text in German, and perform a sight-reading excerpt, among possible other activities. If singers decided to remain with the chorus over a number of years, they would be required to re-audition regularly, although a sight-reading excerpt would only be administered during the first live audition.

Due to the variety in the population sample, some participants were in their first year with the Berwick Chorus and were therefore performing their live audition for the Oregon Bach Festival (including sight-reading) for the first time. Some participants had been in the Berwick Chorus for a number of years and had re-auditioned many times before and a handful of participants had been singing in the Berwick Chorus for decades and had joined the ensemble before there was a sight-reading component to the first audition. While almost all of the study participants had experienced a sight-reading component to an audition before, a small number who fit in this third category may have never sight-read in an audition situation.

Members of the conducting Master Class had to submit video footage of two rehearsals, a biography, a curriculum vitae, and three letters of reference in order to be considered for this competitive group. Selected conductors possessed varied backgrounds; some were primarily choral conductors and others were primarily orchestral conductors. Some had a primarily vocal background, while others were

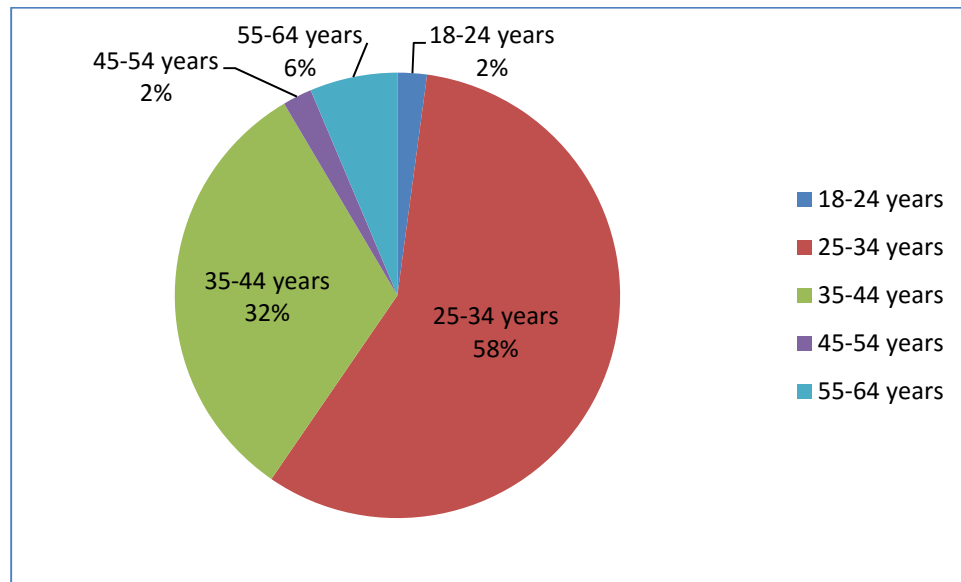
trained primarily as instrumentalists. All of the Master Class participants had singing experience, but some did not consider themselves to be professional singers.

### *Demographic Data*

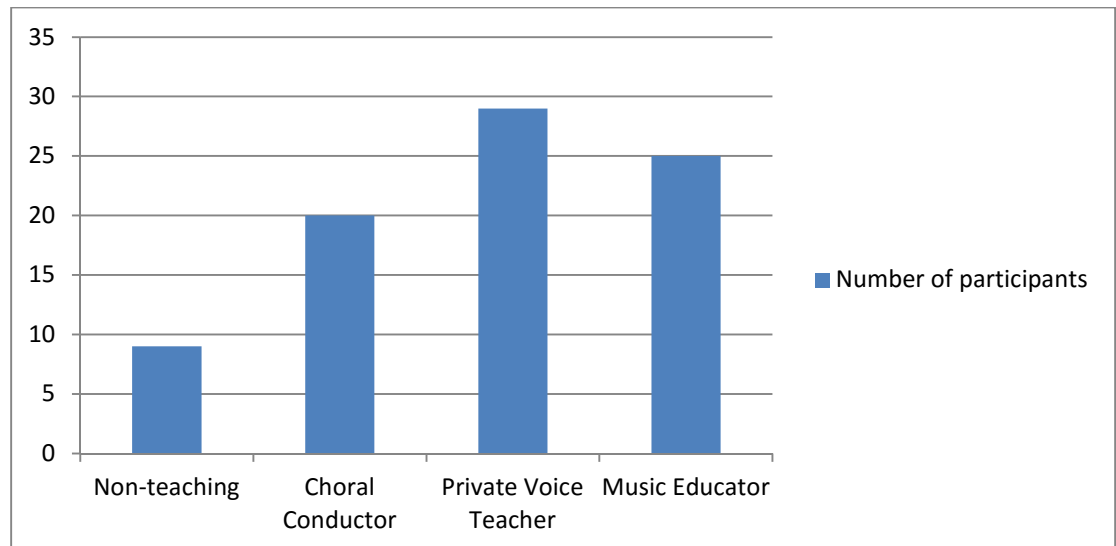
Questionnaires were collected from forty-seven out of forty-eight participants and the following data represent that sample. Ninety-one percent of participants self-identified as professional singers and participants had a mean number of 12 years of professional singing experience. The majority of participants were educated in music: 94% of participants held a bachelor's degree in music, 81% held a master's degree in music, and 26% held a doctoral degree in music. Only 9% of participants did not report a teaching component to their job; the rest were either choral conductors, private voice teachers, music educators, or a combination of the three (see Figure 2.) The majority of participants had piano or other instrumental background: 74% reported intermediate to advanced proficiency on at least one instrument. The majority of participants were between 25 and 34 years of age (complete demographic data is detailed in Figures 1.) At the time that the questionnaires were administered, participants reported residing in 20 unique states and two countries outside of the United States.



**Figure 1. Age Demographics**



**Figure 2. Self-reported teaching component(s) to job**



## **Data Collection Instruments**

### *Questionnaire*

The questionnaire was developed to collect anonymous demographic data about the participants (see Appendix D.) Questions were formulated based on the literature review to collect education and age demographics as well as self-classification in various music professional categories – vocal and instrumental background and self-scoring on sight-reading ability and ability to teach sight-reading. The last question, to briefly describe when you first learned to sight-read proficiently, was intended as a mental primer for the first focus group question. Questionnaire and focus group questions (see Appendix E) were presented to five conducting and music education professors at the University of Maryland School of Music for feedback and recommended changes were incorporated into the final drafts.

### *Focus Group Questions*

Focus group questions fell under two broad categories; how these professionals use sight-reading in their work and how music educators could best teach sight-reading to undergraduate ensemble singers. Four larger questions were formed with possible follow-up questions written beneath them. Question One addressed musical training, sight-reading training, and the importance of sight-reading. Question Two addressed how professional choral singers think about and use sight-reading during the rehearsal process and in an audition situation. Question Three asked participants to describe how they teach sight-reading to their students, if applicable. Question Four addressed more broadly how we as music educators and

choral conductors should teach sight-reading to undergraduate students in the choral rehearsal.

### **Procedures**

Following approval by the University of Maryland Institutional Review Board, I contacted the Acting Director of Artistic Administration at the Oregon Bach Festival to set up seven focus group meeting times over the three-week period of the festival. Ninety minute meeting times were reserved in classrooms in the Frohnmayer School of Music at the University of Oregon in Eugene, Oregon between June 26 and July 11, 2015.

#### *Enlisting Participants*

After the schedule was established, I created a Google form with all seven of the possible dates and times. Using an opportunistic criterion sampling method,<sup>41</sup> I invited sixty-three professional singers and choral conductors by email to participate in the study (see Appendix B.) Forty-eight festival attendees agreed to participate. The survey included a question about whether participants consider themselves to be primarily performers, primarily conductors/ educators, or equal parts performer and conductor/ educator. This question was asked in order to attempt to form relatively homogenous groups of either singers with no teaching experience or singers with teaching experience. The expectation was that singers with teaching experience would want to spend more time talking about how they teach sight-reading versus singers with no teaching experience who would want to spend more time answering the other questions. I used this data to assemble seven focus groups of five to eight

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<sup>41</sup> Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, 32.

participants each. The focus group sessions lasted between 60-90 minutes, depending on how quickly participants answered my planned questions.

### *Interview Process*

I handed out one page questionnaires to each participant before the start of each focus group to collect anonymous demographic data, and collected these questionnaires at the beginning of each focus group. After receiving verbal consent to take part in the study (see Appendix C), I began audio recording the session and asked participants the focus group questions in order. All four of the larger questions were posed to each focus group, but not all follow-up questions were brought into the discussion. Different follow-up questions were raised depending on the path of the discussion and time restraints in each focus group.

One participant wanted to participate in the study, but could not commit to a full focus group session, so I conducted a twenty minute one-on-one interview instead. The same focus group questions were used in the interview.

### *Audio Recording*

Focus groups were audio recorded with an Olympus VN-722PC Digital Voice Recorder. Unfortunately, there were moments of mild to severe cell phone interference in some of the first few audio files that I did not encounter until four of the focus groups had already been recorded. This problem had not occurred in the pilot study, perhaps because it took place in a different facility, and so I had not prepared for it. In the remaining three focus groups, I asked all participants to turn off their cell phones or to put them in airplane mode before the focus group session

began, which eliminated the problem. Fortunately, the cell phone interference was only a problem in the first focus group and only obscured a small number of words.

### *Focus Group Analysis*

Focus group audio recordings were transcribed into Microsoft Word. In order to save time and energy, I transcribed the first four focus groups and sent the remaining three to a transcription service. Each focus group took approximately five hours to transcribe. I began first-level coding by hand to determine larger categories and then combined codes for related ideas. Focus group transcriptions were then imported into MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software and coded under seven larger categories: Training, Professional singer skills, Sight-Reading skills, Audition skills, Importance of Sight-Reading, Teachability, and Teaching (see Table 1.) The codes were analyzed for patterns and themes in the data, as well as useful and illustrative quotes.

**Table 1. Final Code List**

<b>Code name</b>	<b>Number of coded segments</b>
<b>Training</b>	<b>303</b>
Growing up	39
Choral K-12	18
Children's chorus	5
With family	3
Church growing up	12
Listening to classical music	1
Instrumental training	50
College choir	14
Church job	11
Survival/ on-the-job training	20
Lifelong	3
Personal accountability/ fear	12
Aural skills/ theory	51
Dictation	2
Putting names on what you know	3
Creativity	1
Solfège	3
Rhythm	2
Count-singing	13
Singing alto	4
Improving through teaching	3
Practicing/ being immersed every day	6
Challenging yourself/ need to get better at this	12

Encouragement/ confidence	1
Geographic	8
Challenges	20
No or not enough sight-reading training	3
No strong sense of harmonic understanding/ function	3
Singing on text	8
Where taught SR skills?	18
self-taught	6
learning what works best	1
talking to other people/ comparing notes	2
tips from conductors/ seeing marked scores	4
mix of training/ survival	5
<b>Professional singer skills (non sight-reading)</b>	<b>64</b>
Vocal technique/ fine instrument	5
Intonation/ good ear	14
Vocal color/ blend	9
Showing up prepared	1
Quick learner	1
Connections/ interpersonal relationships	5
Luck/ opportunities	1
Experience/ exposure	2
Punctual, reliable/ accountability	2
Easy to work with/ no drama	4
Language knowledge/ text	6
Personality: determination/ motivation	5
Versatility	8
<b>Sight-Reading Skills</b>	<b>373</b>
Method	93
Intervallic	25
Harmonic	38
Solfege/ key areas	19
Intonation	3
Intervallic vs. Harmonic	8
Multiple strategies	4
Filling in notes/ smaller intervals	2
Hum/ fix during rehearsal	6
Other lines	24
Feel in voice/ relative pitch?	15
Playing on leg/ visualize instrument	14
Hanging on	8
Contour	3
Look ahead	7
Score marking	16
Identifying problem spots/ reminders	5
Write in note name	1
Write in counts/ rhythm	3
Write in solfege	2
Write in intervals	7
Whole steps/ half steps	7
Same note	2
Arrows up/ down	4
Memorizing A 440	3
Perfect pitch	28
Tool	
Metronome	8
Tuning fork	15
Audiating	8
Rhythm	8
Internal pulse	1
Style and intuition	18
Pattern recognition	5
Atonal	8
Big picture/ structure	13
Adrenaline/ focus	12

<b>Audition skills</b>	<b>120</b>
Scan	4
Anomalies	9
Anchors	10
Key/ tonality/ solfege	20
Rhythm/ meter	9
Look for patterns	1
Language/ text	2
What are they testing for?	3
Test of character	7
Fear	11
Be confident	6
Keep going	5
Stay calm	10
Technique goes away	2
Not realistic	6
Conduct	3
Practice out loud	3
Sing on text	2
Scat on random syllables	1
Audiate	2
Marking example	1
Be musical	3
<b>Importance of Sight-Reading</b>	<b>114</b>
Very important/ most important/ fundamental skill	14
Hired/ re-hired	15
Time/ money/ economics	33
Adjust/ flexibility	10
Higher level of music-making	6
More difficult/ new music you can do	2
More fun/ more interesting rehearsals	5
Successful auditioning	3
Functional understanding	5
Last minute gigs	4
Score study	7
<b>Teachability</b>	<b>86</b>
SR is a skill/ better with practice	24
Certain people have advantages	13
Can be taught to anyone	9
Can always get better	14
Educator teaching vs. student motivation	8
Depends on length of time	2
Develop ear	7
<b>Teaching</b>	<b>588</b>
Ritual/ consistency	49
Practice sight-reading on piano as well	2
Offer different methods	5
Multiple layers	13
Application/ connecting dots	12
Coordination between MS/ HS/ College	1
Coordination between departments/ aural skills reinforced in choirs	5
Apply to warm-up	10
Relate to repertoire	11
Monetary benefits/ real-life application	15
Progress over time/ recordings	1
Learn musicianship in choir	6
Students don't want to sing in choir	2
Balance/ purpose of choir	13
Choral vs. voice teachers	7
Whose job is it?	6
Private voice	16
Teach them these strategies	4
Talk out loud – describe their process when sight-reading	1
Pattern recognition	4
Start from the beginning and build/ sequential	6

Methodical approach	7
Aural skills/ ear-training	15
Memorize A 440	1
Practice journals	2
Play another instrument	4
Solfege/ Kodaly hand signs	29
Tactile/ need system/ visualize instrument	17
Best practice doesn't exist, be consistent	9
Anchors	1
Keys/ scales/ modes	5
Harmonic understanding	3
Make it fun/ make it a game	5
Dictation	7
Creativity/ composition	10
Rhythm/ meter	33
Count-sing	4
Kinesthetic/ movement	18
Conducting	3
Like learning a language	15
Challenges	11
Not enough time to do a lot of sight-reading	3
Students are terrified of sight-reading	1
Doesn't remember learning how to sight-read	2
Different levels in one class	3
Expect music to be learned	1
Spoonfeeding notes	2
Not sight-reading in aural skills class	2
No leaders/ such low level	3
Read on text/ helpless without solfege	7
Not enough time for one on one attention	3
Easy to hide	2
Building culture	21
Other countries	10
Sight-reading app	4
No piano/ help, instrument as a crutch	10
Read other parts/ clefs	17
Personal accountability/ be independent	20
Give them tools	3
Empower/ inspire them	5
Build confidence	2
Set them up for success	1
Encourage students to like sight-reading	2
Lose fear of failure	1
Students teaching students	1
Weak readers next to strong readers	2
Need to teach sight-reading	6
Even to non-majors	1
Sight-reading choir	6
Meet after class to answer questions	2
Sight-reading class outside of ensemble	3
Group according to level	4
Resources	26



## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This project investigated professional choral singers' perceptions of the importance of sight-reading skills and effective pedagogy for teaching sight-reading to undergraduate choral ensemble singers. Data were gathered first through questionnaire survey questions and then through qualitative analysis of focus group sessions.

### **Questionnaire Data**

Questionnaires were collected to survey education, age range, area of residence, professional job categories, vocal and instrumental background, years of professional choral singing experience, level of sight-reading skill, level of sight-reading teaching skill, and when and how the participant remembers first learning to sight-read proficiently. Questionnaire questions are listed in Appendix D.

Questionnaires were collected from forty-seven out of forty-eight participants.

Answers that the participants either intentionally or unintentionally left blank were not included in the percentage data.

Not necessarily uncommon in the professional music world, the participant sample was highly educated, with over 80% of participants having completed a master's degree. All participants had completed a bachelor's degree. Ninety-four percent of participants held a bachelor's degree in music, 81% held a master's degree in music, and 26% held a doctoral degree in music.

The majority (57%) of participants were between 25-34 years of age. 32% were between 35-44 years of age, and the remaining 11% fell outside of those age

brackets (6% between 55-64 years of age, 2% between 18-24 years of age, and 2% between 45-54 years of age.) There could be many reasons why the bulk of professional choral singers fell between the ages of 25-44, such as the high level of vocal agility and skill mastery needed that is not necessarily developed enough at a younger age, the flexibility required to spend three weeks away from family and work obligations, and the social incentive of being able to spend the summer making music with one's peers.

Participants in this sample resided in 20 out of 50 states and two countries outside of the United States, which is an impressive result given the sample size. The academic teaching population tends to relocate relatively frequently due to the needs of the job market, which might partly explain this result. This result also supports the claim that the Oregon Bach Festival is a nationally and internationally recognized festival rather than a local or regional one. California, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Washington were the highest represented states, with five participants each.

Job categories included professional singer, amateur singer, choral conductor, orchestral conductor, private voice teacher, music educator, professional instrumentalist, composer, and other. Most participants described themselves using more than one category. Highest represented job categories included professional singer (91.5%), private voice teacher (61.7%), music educator (53.2%), and choral conductor (42.6%). Only 9% of participants did not report a teaching component to their job (private voice teacher, music educator, or conductor.) Job types listed under "other" included arts administration, contractor, children's theater music director,

foreign language instructor, adjunct faculty voice, and amateur recorder player (see Table 2.)

**Table 2. Job categories**

Professional Singer	91.5%	Music Educator	53.2%
Amateur Singer	4.3%	Professional Instrumentalist	4.3%
Choral Conductor	42.6%	Composer	8.5%
Orchestral Conductor	6.4%	Other	14.9%
Private Voice Teacher	61.7%		

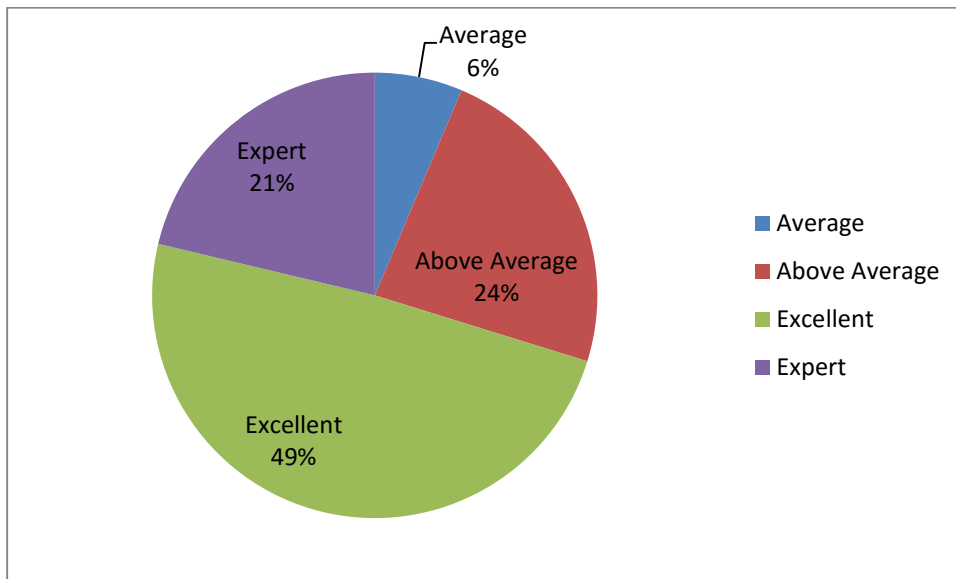
Participants started private voice study at a mean age of 16 and had a mean number of 12 years of professional singing experience. The majority of participants had piano or other instrumental background; 74% reported intermediate to advanced proficiency on at least one instrument. Piano proficiently was listed as follows: 2.2% non-existent, 32.6% beginner, 47.8% intermediate, and 17.4% advanced. Participants began piano study at a mean age of 9.

Seventy-seven percent of participants listed instrumental skill on an instrument other than or in addition to voice or piano. Twenty-three percent of participants listed their skill level on that instrument as beginner, 31.9% listed their skill level as intermediate, and 12.8% listed their skill level as advanced. Participants began studying this instrument at a mean age of 12. Twenty-one percent of participants reported that they have studied at least one other instrument in addition to their primary instrument, voice, and piano.

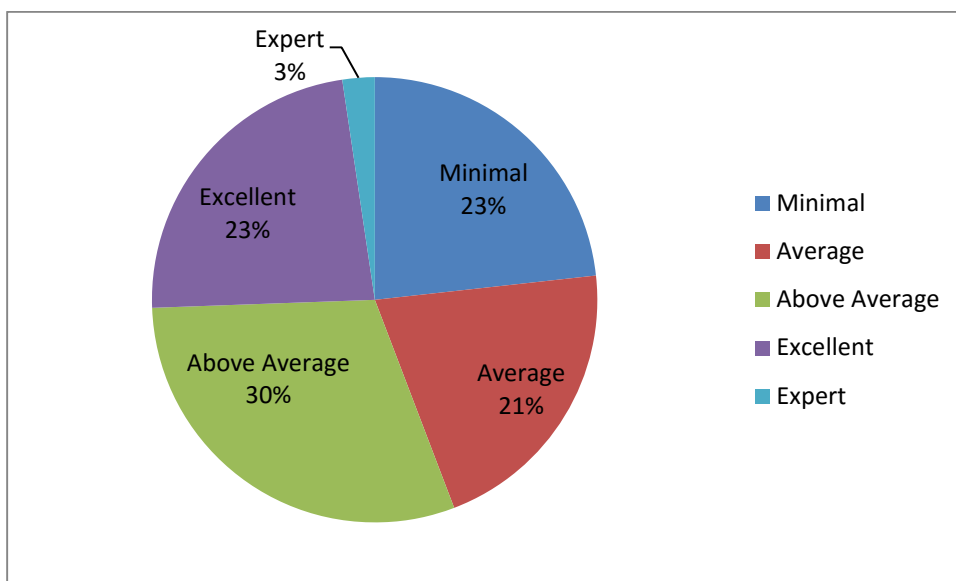
Participants described their vocal sight-reading skills as follows: 6.4% average, 23.4% above average, 48.9% excellent, and 21.3% expert. Participants described their skill at teaching vocal sight-reading as follows: 21.3% minimal, 19.1% average, 27.7% above average, 21.3% excellent, 2.1% expert (see Figures 3

and 4.) Several factors could account for the disparity between participants' sight-reading skills and their skill at teaching sight-reading skills, including that they were never explicitly taught how to teach sight-reading or that sight-reading came relatively easily to them (often due to early instrumental study) and they never remembered learning how to sight-read.

**Figure 3. Participant self-reported sight-reading skills**



**Figure 4. Participant self-reported skill at teaching sight-reading skills**



Finally, participants listed when and how they first remembered learning to sight-read proficiently. Some of the top responses included that they learned to sight-read proficiently while studying an instrument growing up (34.0%), in an aural skills class (31.9%), through a church or other professional singing job (27.7%), or in high school choir (21.3%.) These experiences were elaborated upon further during the focus group sessions.

### **Focus Group Participants**

Table 2 displays focus group participants' pseudonyms, gender, and primary job description. Participants were 56.25% female and 43.75% male. The majority of participants (85%) were Caucasian. As the author and respondents were living and working together every day during the three-week period, many of the respondents did not fill out this survey and instead verbally agreed to participate in the study, so their primary job description was left blank in Table 2.

**Table 3. Focus Group Participants**

<b>Participant (Pseudonym)</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Primarily performer or conductor/ educator?</b>
Abigail	F	primarily performer
Adam	M	equal parts performer and conductor/ educator
Alan	M	
Andy	M	primarily performer
Anthony	M	primarily performer
Becky	F	
Carly	F	primarily conductor/ educator
Corinne	F	primarily performer
Dale	F	equal parts performer and conductor/ educator
Dana	F	equal parts performer and conductor/ educator
Danielle	F	
Eli	M	
Emma	F	
Eugene	M	primarily performer

Evan	M	equal parts performer and conductor/ educator
Gabe	M	primarily performer
Hayley	F	
Holly	F	
Jack	M	
James	M	
Jay	M	primarily performer
Jeffrey	M	
Jill	F	
Joanna	F	equal parts performer and conductor/ educator
John	M	
Karen	F	primarily performer
Kelly	F	
Kelsey	F	primarily performer
Kristen	F	equal parts performer and conductor/ educator
Leah	F	primarily performer
Lillian	F	
Lynn	F	equal parts performer and conductor/ educator
Mark	M	primarily conductor/ educator
Megan	F	equal parts performer and conductor/ educator
Natasha	F	
Oliver	M	primarily conductor/ educator
Pete	M	
Phillip	M	equal parts performer and conductor/ educator
Rob	M	primarily performer
Sadie	F	primarily performer
Samantha	F	
Shannon	F	equal parts performer and conductor/ educator
Tanya	F	equal parts performer and conductor/ educator
Todd	M	primarily conductor/ educator
Valerie	F	primarily performer
Walter	M	primarily conductor/ educator
Wes	M	
Zoe	F	equal parts performer and conductor/ educator

### Question One: Musical Training and Background

*Question 1. What elements in your musical training prepared you for what you have to do as a professional choral singer?*

**Training.** Participants most frequently received their musical training through instrumental study growing up, aural skills class (usually in college but

occasionally in high school or in a children's choir), and through on-the-job training. Other, less common, answers included high school choir, college choir, participating in a children's chorus, growing up singing in church or with their family, through a sense of personal accountability or fear (most frequently in a college choir setting), through a lifelong learning process, improving through teaching, through frequent practice and being immersed in it every day, and by challenging themselves or feeling a need to get better in order to succeed at their job.

Instrumental training was mentioned frequently in all seven of the focus groups and prepared singers in many ways.

*Jay*

I started musical training on instruments from a slightly less young age – about age 7 on the piano, about age 13 on the flute – and I would say that training on both those instruments in addition to consistent choral singing in school and church is what built my musicianship skills.

*Lynn*

All those years of playing scales and playing chord progressions in all different keys kind of helped me translate things and think structurally.

*Dale*

I think it was probably my flute teacher in high school. I took private lessons and he used to throw down a random new duet each week in my lesson and we would sight-read together. And it was, I think, integral to be able to just push through and keep up and be able to read his part at the same time if I got lost. To figure out how to do that... I think it was being forced each week to sight-read something new.

In addition to instrumental training, participants frequently mentioned college aural skills classes as a place where they learned how to use solfege and how to sing and identify different intervals. Several people also mentioned that it was in aural skills class where they learned to “put names on things” that they had learned previously in high school choir or in their instrumental study. Some participants

(mostly instrumentalists) found solfege syllables to be more of a hindrance than a help or an “extra step” because they could already sight-read well. Others found solfege syllables to be extremely helpful.

**Other professional skills.** Participants mentioned a variety of skills other than sight-reading that are important or necessary for a professional choral singer to succeed. Several participants referred to having a “good ear.” Although this is an ambiguous term, they could have been referring to having a strong ear-training or aural skills background, such as the ability to match pitch with a reference note, to reproduce vocally a series of sung or played pitches, to identify sounded intervals readily, or to tune and balance a sung pitch within a chord. In addition to having a “good ear,” other important professional skills included: excellent vocal technique and a fine instrument, impeccable intonation, versatility, knowledge of many languages, and the ability to access a variety of vocal colors. Specific personal traits were also mentioned, such as being punctual, showing up prepared, being a quick learner, being reliable and easy to work with, being determined and motivated, and being able to form interpersonal connections. Professional experience, exposure, and opportunities were also mentioned as important to launching one’s career.

When discussing vocal color, several participants mentioned how they struggled with being asked to sing in a choir with no vibrato for the first time. This style of singing is frequently demanded of some professional choirs in order to achieve maximum blend, especially in early music, but some conductors prefer this style of singing regardless of repertoire. These singers had never attempted to sing



without vibrato before (it is rarely encouraged or discussed in a private voice studio) and some found it quite challenging. Some examples of this include:

*Kristen*

I was never taught alternate vocal colors, I just figured that out when I was hired for a professional choir that was straight-tone only, no vibrato allowed, and so I really struggled with that at first.

*Sadie*

I strongly believe there is no one hundred percent way that you can sing healthily in a choir, no matter what capacity, because you're always performing to a sound. You're always manipulating something, the tiniest thing – whether it's your vibrato, pitch, anything – to match other people. So I feel like through learning a steady technique and vocal health, I have been able to accommodate a safer way of singing in a choir. I think that many people ruin their voices because they don't know how to figure out a balance.

Here is an example of the importance of interpersonal skills:

*Pete*

I would say that I think one of the most important things about being a professional singer is interpersonal relationships and the ability to represent yourself well and communicate really well. That's served me really well, and I guess that's college and that's parents and family, but I think that's probably more important than sight-reading. At least, for me, it's been the ability to form relationships with people and know that you're easy to work with, and that you're a quick learner, and that you're invested.

These professional skills are extremely important and some of them can be discussed in a choral classroom. Singers can begin to think about singing with different vocal colors (including minimal or no vibrato) in their collegiate choir, although it is important for the conductor to be aware that this kind of singing can be extremely taxing, especially for long periods of time and at extremes of the vocal range. Conductors can also promote positive collegiality, respect, and professionalism among singers in addition to mentioning that being prompt, reliable, and easy to work with are extremely important to developing a positive reputation in the community and getting re-hired.

*When did you learn to sight-read proficiently as a singer? How easily did it come to you?*

**Sight-reading proficiency.** Many of the participants mentioned their first church job as their first professional choral singing experience. Several of the singers felt unprepared for the high level of sight-reading that was expected of them at these jobs and felt that they needed to develop better sight-reading skills quickly in order to succeed. Many participants felt that it was during this on-the-job training that their sight-reading skills became proficient.

*Eli*

[The church job] was basically learning by doing, was really the big thing. I kind of had an advantage coming in [having had an instrumental background], but the repetition of just singing as much as we do is what kind of helps, and having to prepare things quickly.

*Kristen*

I almost feel like the best training I got for what I do now was Theory I, learning the intervals sophomore year of college... like, getting drilled on the intervals and then, through a church job in grad school, seeing them so often.

Others received that training from being held personally accountable in their college choirs:

*Mark*

I think that it's not just singing in a choir, because I've sung in lots of choirs that did not advance my musicianship, but that individual accountability, you know, quartet roulette, that kind of thing, and just having to be personally accountable for my own musical preparation. And not having somebody play my part for me ever.

*How important is learning to sight-read? (alternately: You all mentioned that sight-reading prepared you for what you have to do as a professional singer. Why is sight-reading so important?)*

**Importance of sight-reading.** All participants stated that sight-reading is a key criterion in deciding who to employ in professional choirs and many indicated that sight-reading is the single most important skill that a professional

choral singer can develop. Participants expressed that a high level of sight-reading ability allows the singer to audition successfully and to be hired, and even more importantly, re-hired. It also allows the singer to save time learning repertoire and balancing a variety of jobs at once, to be more flexible to the conductor's requests during the rehearsal process, to achieve a higher level of music-making in a shorter amount of time, and to accomplish more difficult or newly composed music successfully.

The most frequently mentioned reason why sight-reading is critically important had to do with economics; limited time and money.

*Jay*

On a professional level, in the world of professional choirs and singers who travel to become part of choirs in different cities, sight-reading is the primary skill. Because, from an economic view, there is very little rehearsal time and money available to spend on that time. So, arriving with either a lot of advanced preparation, which is usually not possible for those of us who are freelancers, or high-level sight-reading skills, that's the primary, necessary skill.

*Adam*

But I think it's important to kind of re-narrow and realize what we're talking about. In the professional situation, it's terribly, terribly important to be able to sight-read and it's economics as much as anything.

The next most frequently listed reason by participants as to why sight-reading is important is that it will frequently determine whether or not the singer will be hired for the gig or re-hired after the first time.

*Leah*

It's the way to get consistently hired back. Because I think if you're among colleagues who are proficient at sight-reading and you're behind in that, it's very quickly apparent. In the professional choral world, that's the top of the list of skills that you need to have.

*Phillip*

I sat on a conducting panel and they were asking us questions about what we look for when we audition people and it was almost unanimous with a bunch of conductors – if you can believe it – that it was: can you sight-read? Are you easy to work with? Punctual, reliable, get along with people. Oh yeah, by the way, and you have a fine instrument as well. But number one and number two.

*Kristen*

So if you're going to try to make it as a gigging professional, I would say my experience – I was trying to think of a percentage – would be 40% technique, 40% sight-singing, 20% are you dependable and kind. And sometimes that 20% can go up or down depending on the community that you're in, but I think we've all known, or maybe we consider ourselves this person, choral singers who aren't the best singer, but they're good, thoughtful musicians, and sight-singing is just really bound up in that.

Flexibility, or the ability to adjust to the needs of the conductor in the moment, was brought up frequently as well. Sometimes singers are asked to prepare one vocal line and then the conductor may ask them to jump to another vocal line in the middle of a rehearsal. Strong sight-reading skills would allow the singer to be able to accomplish that task successfully.

*Lynn*

Yeah, I think it gives you the opportunity, like you said, to be flexible, so that if you arrive and are handed an opening chant, for example, or changes are made, that you are able to make adjustments in the moment. But I guess it is sight-reading that kind of allows you – it's not just being able to learn music effectively, because that suggests that you learn it and then you just keep it in one place, I think the sight-reading suggests the flexibility that's required, and that along with the vocal technique, being able to produce the appropriate sounds that you are being asked to make, I think those two things are pretty primary to what we do as professional singers.

Some participants mentioned some of the more “big picture” elements of strong sight-reading skills; that it is critically important to be able to look outside of your line to what is happening in the other vocal lines or in the orchestra. This helps the singer with high-level intonation tasks and balancing of chords so that they sound

in tune. This is a higher-level task that requires a “good ear” and a harmonic understanding of the music and some argue that sight-reading skill is involved in this process as well.

*Zoe*

I think [sight-reading] is what makes you have the ability to do what you do, in many ways. Considering going from one gig to the other to the other to the other, you only have so much time in the day to be able to learn music. And having that level of musicianship and being able to adjust – it’s not just reading the notes on the page, it’s about hearing how you fit within the texture of the entire work and then being able to say: this is where the music is going. All of those skills that are not just tied to notes and rhythms, that are a part of sight-reading, are a big part of whether you get the next gig or not. Whether you are re-hired.

While this was not mentioned frequently, an important aspect of strong sight-reading skills is being able to get past singing the correct notes, rhythms, texts, etc. and being able to move on to higher levels of music-making more quickly.

*Evan*

But then also, there’s another side of that too – as soon as you get to learn music well, and you have a process in which you can do that, then real music can start to happen because then you can add the other elements of music rather than just, what are the notes, what are the rhythms – that whole other level of artistry which I think is just as important if not more important than learning how to read music and be an effective music producer.

*Karen*

The theory aspect of being able to analyze quickly, like not do an in-depth analysis of something, but look at it and say, okay, this is where I fit into this chord, this is the style of music, this should be the way things are tuned, I’m singing with other people, the tenors are here, this is the root of the chord – and that stuff has to be pretty fluent, I think, for singers to be able to sight-read well and also sing in an ensemble if it’s one or two on a part.

Participants spoke passionately about the importance of sight-reading in their work and listed it as a critically important skill to succeed as a professional choral singer.

## Question Two: Sight-reading in Professional Work

**Question 2.** *I'm interested in how professional singers think about and use sight-reading in the rehearsal process. What sight-reading techniques do you incorporate into your professional singing?*

The data revealed that there are two main strategies that professional singers use to interpret the pitches in their musical line: an intervallic approach and a harmonic approach. The intervallic approach is more linear and follows the line that the singer is sounding and the intervallic leaps that follow one another. The harmonic approach is more key-centered and pays more attention to what scale degree the singer might be singing in any specific key at any specific moment in the piece, being aware that the key center may change over the course of the piece.

Here is a more intervallic approach:

*Walter*

But I sometimes felt like, looking at a leap, I don't know how far this is, so I'm just going to jump and see if I get there. It's kind of like a frog trying to find that lily pad, but once I knew that that lily pad was *la*, I could get it right.

*Adam*

But just to stake my ground a little bit, add me to the intervallic camp. Because at first viewing of something, it's going to be intervals.

*Kelsey*

I think I do a similar thing. Like when I'm just reading, especially for the first time, I kind of go along with it horizontally, trying to find the line and the melody, but then if there's something that I'm missing, then the intervals come into place.

*Lillian*

I sing intervals. I hear intervals and I see them and I just do a lot of intervals all the time.

And some examples of harmonic approaches:

*Lynn*

I definitely try to place myself in a harmonic structure and that always makes a difference.

*Shannon*

For that moment, it makes me think about – even though we’re not in that key – it gives me a key center for a second. And it is typically a sort of *sol-do* or *ti-do* type of thing, when it feels like it’s tonicizing something.

*Becky*

For me, learning a vocal line has an awful lot to do with what is underneath me. Or if it’s an *a cappella* piece, the other voices, either above or below.

*Pete*

I never solfege a song to sight-read it. I always just sing on the words and think of the solfege at the same time. I think that’s kind of how it’s designed.

Some singers described that they consciously use one approach or the other depending on the nature of the work that they are singing; if the piece is largely tonal, they will interpret their line harmonically, if it is atonal, they will think intervallically, from one pitch to the next.

*Jay*

I would say that I use actually different techniques depending on repertoire. For tonal music, I rely very heavily on my harmonic ear. Especially composers with whom I’m very familiar, like Bach and Handel, I tend to predict what the melodic line will do, or what the harmonic line will do, which I suppose is a bit of cheating, but at the same time, it’s a tool. When that doesn’t work, intervallic reading can be very useful, especially for atonal music or music written in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. And so, usually on a day to day basis, there is something of a hybrid. Between being aware of the key area and the function of each pitch in the key area and then using that awareness to inform the ear of where the pitches will go or what they will do. And when all else fails, using intervallic reading.

*Karen*

There are all kinds of different ways of thinking about it, too. There is the vertical kind of interval way, which it seems like you use a lot. And I think the linear functional thing actually works for me a little bit better. I think that’s what I do more, like once we go through it once or something. But sometimes I need to – like if I’m not getting an interval, I think about just that interval. But sometimes it helps to think about a couple notes later and where you’re going – maybe in Romantic music.

While both approaches seem helpful, the harmonic approach seems more useful than the intervallic approach because it gives the singer more information

about the key area and harmonic language of the piece, as well as information that would influence tuning, such as what note the singer is singing in the chord at any given moment. However, the harmonic approach takes more time to develop, as it requires a thorough background and understanding of music theory (and often develops more easily in singers with a strong instrumental background.) Singers with a weak theory background may find it extremely challenging to think about music in this way. It is interesting that there was such diversity in the approaches that the participants used when thinking about music – one might assume that high-level professional singers would all be thinking harmonically about the music, but it seems evident that a good percentage of the participants used a highly-developed intervallic system of reading. It seemed like the participants with a strong instrumental background were more likely to describe a harmonic approach while participants with only a vocal background were more likely to think intervallically, but this was not one-hundred percent correlated.

*Let's say you are in a professional choral rehearsal and you keep missing a note in a specific passage. The conductor runs that passage two more times to fix an unrelated problem. Can you talk about what strategies you use in the subsequent run-throughs to accurately find and sing that note?*

**Score marking.** I asked participants to describe the sight-reading strategies that they use on the job and many described highly individualized systems of score marking to create reminders or visual cues in the score about problem spots that might include difficult pitches or rhythms. The score markings that the singers described were influenced frequently by the overall intervallic or harmonic strategy that the singers used.



*Lynn*

For me, marking the score quickly is key. Like on the first or second read, to quickly say – that requires my attention. Just so that I know I need to attend to it. And then the rest of it, if it's not marked, then I know it's going to be more instinctive. But I quickly mark those things and even as they become more familiar and instinctual, I just have little reminders of those key points to pay extra attention.

*John*

In music where it's really applicable, especially with a leap, I'll find myself writing in, "Oh that's *sol* or that's *fi*" or whatever. Just like at a specific moment that I had a struggle.

*Jack*

Sometimes if I'm looking at it and I see that it's arpeggiating a chord, or depending on how it functions within a bar – and again, that goes back to the theory. If I see in the harmonic structure that we're outlining a chord, that helps me.

Score marking strategies that singers specifically mentioned included: writing in note names, rhythmic counts, solfege syllables, intervals (with specific markings for whole steps, half steps, and repeated notes), and arrows up or down to help locate pitches.

**Other strategies.** There were also other strategies that many singers expressed for finding their pitches, such as looking at other voices or instruments in the score that might have a line that is helpful to them or "hanging on" to their previously sung pitch during a rest. Some pretend to "play on their leg" an imaginary instrument that they have studied, using the fingerings for that instrument; others "feel" the sensation of what it is like to sing a notated pitch in the voice and use that as a guide. Some singers navigate larger leaps by mentally filling in stepwise pitches or smaller intervals and some think about melismatic passages by looking at the overall shape or contour of the line. Some participants mentioned that, in dire circumstances, they will hum helpful pitches during a rehearsal in order to help them

find a difficult entrance. Singers expressed having a variety of strategies available to them and trying them one at a time until one works successfully in that moment.

Different pieces of music have different challenges, so it does not seem like there is only one “best” approach, but that professional singers must have a variety of tools available to them.

*Megan*

So I don't have perfect pitch, but I have really strong muscle memory for some specific notes or just even kind of a range. I was helping one of my students with the Barber song “Nuvoletta” recently and it has some really tricky stuff. So there's this really low chord and you have to come in on a high G, which I feel like for sopranos, a lot of us, is kind of like that comfortable head voice money note, like you feel it in there. Sometimes the muscle memory or the feeling of the note can be enough.

*Anthony*

It's interesting. I think there's a certain way in which, the more instruments you play, the more those skills sort of cross-pollinate, in a way. So when I see notes on a page, when I see a melody, I'm thinking of several things. I'm thinking of a) how it's going to sound, b) how it's going to feel in my voice, and c) how it would feel if I were playing it on a piano. I think of intervals in terms of finger distance – you know, when you have that sort of visceral relationship with notes on a page. And so all three or four of those things are the things that inform what I actually produce.

*Oliver*

What I learned was that using the syllables helped me – if there is a recurring note, it helped me to come back to the exact same note. That made it easier. So today, even if I don't use the syllables, sometimes in a bar or in a specific area, it helps me to see that there is a note that I come back to, and then I “control-S,” you know, save this note, and jump back to the same note.

Participants mentioned the importance of looking ahead and pattern recognition in sight-reading.

*Dale*

I think one of the biggest things I remember in some of my flute stuff was just the constant – remember you need to be looking ahead, you need to identify patterns – that sort of thing. And that's still integral, especially with Bach, that I'm not just stuck on the note that I'm singing. And I keep forgetting that so many people – young musicians – that's where they are, and they're not

scanning ahead to see what's coming next, or that the note that I'm currently on might be helpful later. You're totally multi-tasking, because you're in one place, but you're scanning ahead, and I think that's a major thing.

The vast majority of participants mentioned using score marking and other strategies to find pitches and rhythms quickly during rehearsal and to sing them accurately. This seems to be a critical tool to working successfully as a professional choral singer and it seems imperative that singers develop these or similar strategies for themselves in order to succeed.

**Style and intuition.** Singers frequently discussed the idea of musical “style and intuition.” They explained that once you sing a lot of music by the same composer or from the same time period, you begin to develop a familiarity with the harmonic palette, vocal writing, and general compositional rules that the composer follows. You can then begin to make intuitive “leaps” when sight-reading other music by that composer or of that time period.

*Todd*

I think it's important to have exposure and be able to place repertoire in its approximate time period. Because understanding – I mean, if you've done enough Bach, the harmonies really start to make sense, but at the beginning – wow, it's a mystery. But then being able to adjust – okay, we're dealing with a modal composition, Viennese, classical, whatever. And it's not just a style issue, I think it really helps to make the connections that much quicker vocally, so it requires contextual knowledge.

*Kristen*

But all of these skills, I think sometimes in some situations you cannot apply them fast enough, so they're in there somewhere and you make an educated guess, or just an informed, intuitive leap, maybe. And I think those happen so often we don't even notice them, but again, it's trusting the style, and then if you keep wanting to leap down a fourth instead of a fifth, you just add an arrow or you add an interval or you add a solfege syllable, or whatever.

*Jill*

I think those experiences really informed my musicality because my recorder teacher didn't dumb things down. She would just find simpler, historically appropriate material for us to play. So I grew up playing Baroque music, and that really subconsciously put musicality in my ear before I even thought about it.

Familiarity with different musical styles usually comes only from frequent exposure, so it seems important to perform and listen to music from a variety of styles and eras to develop this kind of familiarity and musical intuition.

*Where did you learn these particular strategies that you are describing? If you learned them on your own, how did you do it?*

**Where did they learn these skills?** Participants mentioned a variety of places where they learned the skills that they described. Some had to figure them out for themselves on the job. Some were taught to them by their conductors either explicitly or by seeing their conductors' marked scores and how they marked whole steps, half steps, etc. Some learned by comparing notes with other singers and conductors. Most described an amalgamation of things they were taught and things they came up with themselves in an attempt to find what works best for them in any situation.

*If you are asked to sight-read something at an audition, what process do you use?*

**Sight-reading during an audition.** Participants discussed sight-reading at an audition in a very different way than they discussed using sight-reading skills in a rehearsal. Many described feelings of fear and anxiety even though many of these singers are the top professionals in their field! Participants described sight-reading at an audition as a test of character and use mental mantras such as "be confident," "keep going," and "stay calm" to persevere. A few even suggested attempting to be

musical while sight-reading, such as incorporating dynamics or phrasing into the example. Several participants mentioned attempting to determine what the sight-reading example is “testing for” – whether it has complicated rhythms, pitches, modulations, etc., and approaching it from that angle. Several indicated that sight-reading at an audition is “not realistic” because a singer would never be asked to sight-read something in performance without ever having rehearsed beforehand. Others mentioned that it is hard to focus on good vocal technique in this kind of high-stress environment.

Most participants indicated that they begin preparing for sight-reading during an audition with a mental scan of the vocal line, although different singers scan for different things. Some look for melodic or harmonic “anchors” like identifying *do*, *mi*, and *sol* in the example and seeing if it starts and ends in the same key. Others look for melodic or rhythmic “anomalies” like melodic leaps or difficult rhythms and try to work those out first. Some singers look for patterns and some read through the text, especially if it is in a non-English language. Some mentioned that they always begin by looking at the meter and rhythm (sometimes while conducting) and others begin with the key or tonality and start by internally reading through the example on solfege syllables. Most of the singers had a “method” that they consistently use, but clearly, it is a highly individualized process.

**Perfect pitch.** Four participants in the study (8.3%) indicated that they have “perfect pitch,” or the ability to identify or create a musical pitch without a reference tone. They indicated that they use very different strategies to find starting pitches or read music in rehearsals and in auditions than the rest of the participants described

because they do not need to rely on other parts to find their notes. These participants rely heavily on their sense of pitch in their reading. The two scenarios that were more challenging for these participants were when singing an *a cappella* piece with an ensemble where the choir as a whole flats or sharps in pitch and when performing at non-standard tunings, such as “Baroque pitch” (generally A=415 Hz.) Some of these singers described eventually “getting used to” singing in different pitch systems over time and one described reading her notes using different clefs (such as soprano, alto, tenor, bass, mezzo-soprano, and baritone clefs) to remedy the change in tuning.

### **Question Three: How do you teach sight-reading?**

**Question 3.** *Do you teach sight-reading to your students? How did you decide on a methodology for teaching? What resources do you use?*

Some of the participants taught sight-reading to their students. Many taught sight-reading in private voice studios and others taught in choral classrooms, ranging from elementary school to college-level students.

**Routine practice.** Participants mentioned many different ways in which they try to incorporate sight-reading into their teaching. Some mentioned that it is important to schedule enough time for daily sight-reading into the rehearsal process.

*Jack*

It’s really important that I pick music that [is] accessible [to them], and I can also still have plenty of time to do sight-reading. If I pick music that is too hard for them, then I can’t prioritize that, and also down the line, if they can’t sight-read and do rhythm and really challenging things and work on ear-training and so many other things, it really limits the music I can do, and I’m always stuck doing very basic music.

*Adam*

I try to use ritual. I basically make sure that the first five minutes of every lesson, I throw them something that they sight-read. And they hate it, every time. If I’m feeling really mean, I’ll use *Modus Novus*, you know that

volume? All atonal sight-singing, like, here you go, it's Friday. But, that's just making sure that they know that that's going to happen whether they like it or not, the first five minutes of the voice lesson, and that just becomes something that they expect and something to kind of get psyched up for.

One participant mentioned that it is not the first read-through that is the most important, but trying not to make the same mistakes the second time:

*Mark*

I always make them re-read it again, because sight-reading isn't about – can you read it perfectly the first time, but can you make sure that you never make that same mistake again in rehearsal. Because nobody is perfect, but I try not to make the same mistake twice as a reader.

Students can learn and develop strategies to become better sight-readers by being expected to sight-read frequently in their classes, rehearsals, and lessons.

**Culture.** Several participants mentioned the “culture” of the school where they teach and how it can be very difficult to “sell” sight-reading and musicianship training in a school or a department where sight-reading and music literacy is not a priority.

*Kristen*

It is exhausting to try to convince students day in and day out of the validity of something that they don't see the validity of. So it's about building that culture.

*Lynn*

Because it was part of the culture. So I think what I'm learning is that it has to become part of the regular routine that we teach. So that it just becomes an expectation and it's not a stressful project.

Participants who taught at schools where music literacy training was already a part of the culture had a much easier time implementing sight-reading training into their classrooms. These participants were also more likely to teach students who were used to being asked to sight-read and expected it. Some participants had to build a culture

of music literacy at their school by themselves and expressed that it takes a great deal of time and effort to do so.

**Whose job is it?** Along with the idea of sight-reading culture came the idea of whose job it is to teach sight-reading to students. Is it the job of the theory/aural skills teacher, the choral director, the voice teacher, or a combination of all three?

*Lynn*

The issue of whose job is it seems to be a really big problem. Because it is extremely central. But it seems like we all agree that it is everyone's job – that we've got to do it and we've got to do it, I suppose, in small chunks regularly.

Some participants expressed that it is everyone's job to commit to teaching music literacy and practicing sight-reading with their students. However, some participants expressed that they have colleagues in their university who do not see it as their job to teach sight-reading and refuse to do so. It seems like students would benefit from regular and consistent exposure to sight-reading through a variety of classes, including aural skills, private voice lessons, and in the choral rehearsal.

**Teaching solfege.** Many participants mentioned the importance of teaching a solfege system to their students:

*Carly*

I think it's important to choose a system for them because they don't know.

*Holly*

I want my students to learn solfege because I really see the value of it. And I find when I ask them to sight-read for their choral auditions, for example, if they're just absolutely screwing it up, then I'll say, "Try it on solfege, the starting note is *do*." They always do better.

Many participants were trained to use solfege syllables in their aural skills classes and still think about music in terms of those systems today. While a few participants did



not personally find solfege systems useful (most of these participants grew up playing instruments and found the syllables to be more of a hindrance than a help), many participants believed that a solfege system can be especially helpful for students who do not have an instrumental background. It gives them a framework and a more “tactile” way of envisioning sung pitches and the relationships between them.

**Teaching strategies.** Some participants taught elements of score marking to their students:

*Becky*

I tell my students all the time, if you write it down, you don't have to think about it as hard. You just don't – you see it. You can think about other things.

Some described teaching their students some of the strategies that they use in professional singing situations.

*Megan*

I was going to say, having multiple strategies – and maybe the first one doesn't work, it depends on the situation. But I think for me, the thing that helps me the most is just being like, okay, this is tricky, I'm sure there's a strategy that's going to help me and I kind of go through my checklist. And I do this a lot with my students. I have students in community choirs and they'll be really stressed about something and it's like, “well, gosh, I was singing an E-flat and I have to sing it four bars later but why can't I remember it?” Because maybe they have just one strategy, like the RAM [mentally holding on to a previously sung note] thing isn't working in that situation.

It seems like teaching score marking and sight-reading strategies to students could be extremely beneficial, as they may not initially come up with them on their own.

*Do you believe that advanced sight-reading skills can be taught?*

Most of the focus groups wanted clarification on this question. I followed up with, “do you think that any singer in a vocal performance undergraduate four-year program could be taught advanced enough sight-reading skills that they could work successfully as a professional singer?” Most of the respondents agreed that sight-

reading is a skill, not an inherent talent that some people are born with, so yes, it could be taught.

*Shannon*

I think it can be taught, but it's more just about doing it than anything else.

*Todd*

Like any other thing, it's by repetition and craft.

*Samantha*

There's always room to grow.

*Valerie*

I mean, I think any skill can be taught. But you talk so much about – you can't do it all at once. It has to be a process. You have to know how to read music first, then you have to know how to read rhythm. It's sort of like building blocks.

Some singers mentioned that they felt that even their own personal sight-reading skills could continue to grow and that they try to continue to practice and develop these skills even now.

*Mark*

I think it's still an ongoing process, I'd like to think I'm a better singer today than I was yesterday.

Other participants believed that it was an incomplete question because there are skills other than sight-reading that allow someone to work as a successful professional choral singer.

*Holly*

I feel a little bit like it's a trick question because there's more to being qualified for a professional choir than being a really excellent sight-reader. There has to be musicality, there has to be the ear, and when I audition students, I often tell them, if they've got really good – if they can pitch match well, if they can sing back intervals, but their sight-reading isn't so good, I always say it's easier to learn sight-reading than to learn pitch-matching. The ear is hard to – it's not necessarily something you're born with. I mean, you can develop it, but a good sense of pitch tends to be innate, and sight-reading

is definitely a skill that you can develop. So yeah, I think anybody can learn to sight-read well. Not everybody can learn to be a really great musician.

There was consensus in all seven of the focus groups that sight-reading is a skill that can be taught and developed, but there were questions about whether a teacher can necessarily do all the work to get a student to a proficient level or if the student needs some kind of internal motivation or drive to get to that level. As evidenced in Holly's statement, there are also other critically important skills necessary to becoming a professional choral singer and excellent sight-reading skills alone will not win a singer the job.

**Resources.** Participants mentioned a variety of sight-reading resources that they use with their students. They most frequently mentioned Ottman and Rogers' *Music for Sight Singing*, Edlund's *Modus Vetus* and *Modus Novus*, Hindemith's *Elementary Training for Musicians*, McGill's *90 Days to Sight Reading Success*, Dandelot's *Manuel pratique pour l'étude des clés*, hymnals, Bach chorales, materials developed by Marianne Ploger, and examples from the choral music that the ensemble is currently learning.

#### **Question Four: How should we teach sight-reading?**

**Question 4.** *How do you think we should teach sight-reading to undergraduate choral singers in rehearsal settings? What skills do you think are the most important/ useful?*

Participants' responses to how we should best teach sight-reading to undergraduate choral singers were the most disparate, suggesting that there is probably not one best way to teach sight-reading, but many different strategies that could be part of a successful global approach.

**Consistent practice.** The most common answer to this question was to simply sight-read in rehearsal a lot and practice regularly. Because sight-reading is a skill, participants felt that regular and consistent practice was the best way to hone this skill and prepare for life after college.

*Lynn*

We have to be doing that on a regular basis for two reasons - I think it allows them to practice it and I think it makes it safer. I think it's another way to overcome performance anxiety, which we don't discuss very frequently. Like, how are you going to handle that? It throws people into an unexpected, unknown situation regularly so that when they go into an audition or that kind of thing, they are used to the feeling and all of that. So I think that's really helpful.

*Todd*

I think they also have to practice – back to the skill question – error detection for themselves and for others. Because the thing that a professional singer has to be is full of initiative and proactive in the rehearsal and outside. And so being able to create the solutions, detecting both from others and yourself and making that shift.

*Wes*

And I think what Jack said that's really important is consistency regardless of strategy, as long as it's effective and something that they can recall when they're at those other levels or when they're under pressure or anything like that, is hugely important.

Participants also mentioned that it is important that the college choral program use the same solfege system as the theory department and the local area high schools to maintain consistency. While this is not always possible, they mentioned that imposing the system you were trained in in a state that uses an entirely different system is confusing and counter-productive.

**Personal accountability.** Personal accountability came up a number of times. Some participants felt that the best way to prepare undergraduate ensemble

members to succeed in the real world after college was to take away crutches such as the piano and build more musically independent singers.

*Mark*

Well, I'm not a great keyboardist. But I did come from studying with very fine pianists who never touched the keyboard in rehearsal. And I just became more and more convinced that that was the way to go – to let them struggle through it. And let there be these horrible sounds in rehearsal, which we don't want as an ensemble director, but I think that they need to have the opportunity to fail and lose that fear of failure.

Some participants built their own musical independence by having nothing but an A 440 tuning fork in rehearsal to help them find their starting pitches and recommended this technique for college choirs.

*Carly*

A system that would be really interesting to integrate more into American music is just the tuning fork. Because I see that as just the ultimate empowering tool. That you assume responsibility of finding those pitches and checking it during rehearsal and it just – I don't know, I see a lot of power in it.

Building further on this idea of musical independence, some participants mentioned building confidence and empowering students as being very important goals.

*Sadie*

Teaching confidence more than anything is very important when it comes to music or singing.

*Carly*

And I would say that in empowering – whether they're junior high students or university students – you want to empower them to access the music quicker and deeper and also sight-read with dynamics, which we haven't talked about yet. But for me as a teacher, my job is to empower them to be better musicians, not to be this *director*.

**Real-life applications.** Participants discussed the importance of revealing real-life applications to learning these skills to help students connect the

dots between what they are doing in school and how it will eventually help them succeed in the professional world.

*Karen*

I don't know that the connection was made for all of the singers in a theory class, a sight-reading class, between the exercises we were doing – the theory and analysis – and the practical applications, so how this could be useful... There's sort of a disconnect in a lot of these different cases - between the way it's taught and the connection to the practical application. I mean, there is a big disconnect.

*Eugene*

But making sure that teachers know to say in their classes, like making sure ear-training, aural skills teachers are making it a point – particularly to singers, because the oboist is probably not going to have to be in the church choir – but if they're just making it a point as a part of their teaching to remind everyone when they're making you sing diminished sevenths, just think how much easier your life will be.

This idea of discussing real monetary benefits of learning how to sight-read proficiently with students seems extremely important. As participants indicated previously, strong sight-reading skills help professional choral singers learn music quickly and juggle more work at once, so mentioning to students how these skills will help them succeed would be a quick and easy way to help make learning to sight-read proficiently become more important and meaningful.

**Purpose of choir.** Some participants talked more philosophically about whether the purpose of choir at the university level was to raise the musicianship skills of the choir members to the highest possible degree, produce the best possible performances, or a mixture of both. Some argued that universities place too high a priority on concert production at the expense of spending time teaching music literacy.

*James*

So much of our music education at the high school level and even, I would say, a lot of undergraduate music programs, is so performance driven. It focuses on the product and not the process.

Some participants took the concept even further and suggested offering a choir that focuses solely on musicianship training instead of performing.

*Jay*

I think every university should have a course that's a sight-reading choir. After you maybe do your two or three years of ear-training, then you've got a semester where you just read. And you're not in it to work on a performance, you're in it to build the reading skills in real context.

One participant actually spends ten minutes each Friday putting his students in a mock professional choral situation to train them how to prepare and succeed in these kinds of jobs. No one else mentioned anything else like this, so it is probably not commonly done at the university level.

*Phillip*

We have this thing called Motet Friday, that on Friday we have 10 minutes and I say, okay, you just got a church job... What's the first thing that you do when you go there? And they say, "Find out where your folder is, get your pencils, get your music, get a bulletin, see if you wear robes and then find your chair and get there early."

He said that he has never asked his students to sight-read something publically in a performance setting, but mentioned that he has considered it and may try it soon. He also mentioned an all-state high school sight-reading choir model in Florida:

*Phillip*

Which makes Florida I think the gold standard. They actually have an all-state sight-reading choir that's only for 12<sup>th</sup> graders and that's the one all the seniors want to be in. They show up on the first day and they read through ninety pieces of music on the first day. And they choose their program on that day, and then the next two days they rehearse their program and they perform it for everyone. I mean, what a great model.

Interestingly, a small number of participants disagreed completely and felt that the ensemble rehearsal room was not the ideal place to teach sight-reading.

*John*

I'm speaking in utopian terms, but I don't really think the rehearsal setting is the place to teach sight-singing.

*Todd*

I don't know, I just – have you ever been bored in a rehearsal? That's one of my missions about every choral rehearsal, that people are engaged and challenged – attainable challenges. So the problem with this question is we don't have the luxury of differentiating to large, large numbers, that people are going to get bored and it's a waste of their time and resources. And they're not serving the people who don't know how to read by being there because they are a crutch. So that's why I'm now exploring an auxiliary component [teaching sight-reading outside of rehearsal.] It's not fully removed from the rehearsal process but for those who need some system that don't have anything.

There are obviously completely different opinions about the purpose of choir at the university level: whether it should be primarily focused on skill building or primarily performance driven. All participants believed that sight-reading is an important skill that should be taught in the university music program, but participants had differing opinions about whether it should be taught in the choral rehearsal or elsewhere.

**Challenges.** Participants brought up a number of challenges to being able to successfully teach sight-reading to their ensembles, such as not having enough time, that students are terrified of sight-reading, that there are students at a variety of different sight-reading levels in one class, that there are no sight-reading leaders in the choir, that it is so easy for the more beginning students to hide among proficient readers, and that the conductors or teachers themselves don't ever remember learning how to sight-read because it came easily to them and therefore don't feel confident teaching it. Some potential solutions to these problems were brought up in some of



the focus groups, but there are still clearly many challenges to teaching sight-reading regularly in the ensemble rehearsal.

**Rhythm.** Rhythmic sight-reading tended to come up later in the discussions than melodic sight-reading, although it did depend on the composition of the focus group. Some focus groups contained singers or conductors who were trained using a great deal of rhythmic teaching strategies, such as count-singing, and those participants were more likely to mention rhythmic components to sight-reading earlier than the others. The topic of rhythmic sight-reading brought up a number of different teaching ideas.

*Samantha*

The problem with choral music is that we don't really have complicated rhythms unless you get into a certain kind of repertoire, so a lot of us are really good sight-readers, but if you actually get more challenging stuff, you would be surprised at how bad your sight-reading is.

*Carly*

I think that putting – and even with college maybe this is an unpopular opinion – but I think with college, putting kinesthetic movement and making it active and not making it like we're going to sit down and sight-read. To me, that would be amazing, if we went into all university settings, and we were active. We were just more active with our theory, with our sight-reading, with choral singing, you know, that it wasn't this fear of expression.

*Oliver*

I had an amateur choir of adult singers mostly, and I decided to dedicate part of the rehearsal for sight-reading. And it was very important for me to put the emphasis on rhythm because I found out that if they are able to read rhythm, then usually the pitches would find their way. And now to the second part of the question, how did I teach that. Patterns. Teaching them patterns. So for example, patterns that incorporate eighth notes and sixteenth notes inside one beat. There's a limited amount of six or seven of those, so I would just write them on the board, and then just – let's sing this one, this one, this one. Just be able to recognize the pattern. And then I would write several patterns, one after the other, and we would perform them, and then I would add slurs or rests, like change one element into a rest. Then all these very complex rhythms became very easy if you recognize the patterns inside the beat. So that's the way I used it.

Accurate rhythm is an extremely important component of proficient sight-reading. It is telling that rhythmic sight-reading took such a secondary seat to melodic sight-reading in many of the focus groups, even among professional singers and educators. Participants raised ideas about kinesthetic movement to help internalize rhythms and breaking down more difficult rhythms into smaller patterns so that they become more familiar and recognizable. Rhythmic sight-reading needs to be addressed as well as melodic sight-reading in order to strengthen students' overall sight-reading accuracy.

**Offering different methods.** Some participants talked about incorporating as many different methods as possible into their teaching to appeal to different styles of learners and to try to internalize the musical concepts.

*John*

We talked about composing as well. It's just approaching it from different ways, whether it's hearing, seeing, listening, or physicalizing it, just approaching it from every way possible.

It seems important to use every tool possible to strengthen music literacy in the choral rehearsal because there are a variety of learners who will approach each method of learning in a different way.

## **Conclusion**

Participants shared their sight-reading training, strategies that they use in rehearsals and auditions, how they teach sight-reading to students, and their ideas about how to teach sight-reading at the undergraduate level. It seems like learning an instrument at an early age is immensely helpful in preparing singers to become proficient sight-readers. Participants also learned how to sight-read proficiently through aural skills and music theory classes, training in choral rehearsals, and on-

the-job training at a church job or other professional singing job. All participants listed sight-reading as a critically important skill to succeed as a professional choral singer.

Participants described two main methods of thinking about their sight-reading: an intervallic approach that is more linear and follows the intervallic leaps of the sung voice part and a harmonic approach that is more key-centered. Some singers use the harmonic approach with primarily tonal music and switch to the intervallic approach for atonal music. The harmonic approach seems more useful, but requires a more thorough understanding of music theory to implement successfully. Surprisingly, many of the participants described using a primarily intervallic approach, indicating that it is still possible to be successful by using an intervallic method. Several of these “primarily intervallic” singers readily admitted that they did not think that their way was the best way, but that it was the most comfortable approach for them. Instrumentalists were much more likely to describe using a harmonic approach than non-instrumentalists.

Participants described two broader categories of strategies that they use during a choral rehearsal. Most singers mark their scores in specific ways to remind themselves of difficult sections, mark in solfege syllables or intervals, clarify difficult rhythms, etc. Singers use strategies other than score marking to find their pitches, such as listening to another voice part or instrument, “holding on” mentally to a previously sung pitch, or visualizing an instrument that they play. Despite coming from different backgrounds and training at many different universities, participants described surprisingly similar score marking techniques and sight-reading strategies

and it is unclear why that would be the case. It seems like teaching these strategies to students would be an excellent way to encourage them to develop their own score marking techniques that would aid them in their sight-reading.

Participants used a different approach when sight-reading in an audition situation. Given a short amount of time to prepare the sight-reading example, many singers use their time to scan for either melodic anchors or melodic or rhythmic anomalies that would require extra attention. Many participants expressed feelings of fear or anxiety that accompany cold sight-reading at an audition and use mental mantras and positive self-talk to remain calm. It seems like it would be beneficial to ask students to sight-read in audition situations somewhat regularly so that they can develop strategies for themselves about how to approach sight-reading in a time-sensitive environment and so that they can become more confident and less frightened of auditions. It is, after all, critically important that singers are able to succeed in auditions since that is the primary way that they will get work.

Four participants in the study had perfect pitch and described significantly different ways of thinking about music and finding pitches. They did not have to develop strategies to find their pitches because they do not need to rely on other parts to find their notes, but they experience different challenges, such as performing a piece in a different key from the one printed in the music. The sample size was too small to develop strong conclusions about this unique portion of the musical population, but it might be helpful as educators to be aware of the different challenges that singers with perfect pitch face in order to help them overcome those challenges.

When I asked participants about how to teach sight-reading, they mentioned some specific strategies, like building regular and consistent practice into rehearsals, but they also spoke more philosophically about the broader goals of the choral department and music school. Is music literacy an important goal or part of the teaching culture of the school? Whose job is it to teach sight-reading? Is the goal of the choral department to build strong musicians or to put on performances of the highest caliber? These questions seem central to whether or not it will even be possible to build a strong culture of sight-reading in the choral department. While some choral directors can begin to change the culture of a school on their own, this seems unrealistic at a medium or large university where there are many different courses and professors. It also seems unlikely that students will become proficient sight-readers by the work of one teacher alone, but that the skills need to be developed and honed throughout students' educations in their aural skills classes, private voice lessons, and choral rehearsals. Part of the solution is also finding a way to motivate students to learn and practice this skill on their own. It is important that teachers discuss the real-life applications and monetary benefits of becoming proficient sight-readers with students in order to connect the dots between the classes that they are taking and life after college.

Some participants discussed making students personally accountable for their own learning and musical independence. Some strategies would be running rehearsals without the aid of a piano or by giving tuning forks to each student so that they must develop strong aural skills and sight-reading skills in order to keep up in choir and sing their part accurately. Others mentioned the importance of empowering students

by teaching them skills, giving them tools, and helping them develop confidence in their sight-reading abilities by allowing them to fail at first and get better over time.

An important question that came up in some of the focus groups is whether or not the choral rehearsal is a good place to practice sight-reading. Large groups of students end up in the same choir together and often possess different sight-reading abilities. How can we challenge everyone to grow without boring the advanced sight-readers or leaving the beginning sight-readers behind? Some participants suggested a tiered approach to sight-reading, where beginning sight-readers are just focusing on reading on solfege, for example, and more advanced sight-readers could add other layers, such as text, dynamics, phrasing, and musicality. It is also important to remember to challenge students in terms of rhythmic sight-reading as well as melodic sight-reading, as singers in particular tend to be less proficient with difficult rhythms. Some participants mentioned a number of less frequently used approaches that could help solidify or synthesize sight-reading, such as dictation, kinesthetic movement, or having students reflect on sight-reading growth through journaling. It seems important to incorporate as many different strategies as possible when teaching sight-reading to appeal to a variety of learners and to continue to challenge students to grow in different ways.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

### Summary

This project was designed to investigate professional choral singers' perceptions of the importance of sight-reading skills and effective pedagogy for teaching sight-reading to undergraduate choral ensemble singers. Forty-eight professional singers and conductors were recruited from the Summer 2015 Oregon Bach Festival's Berwick Chorus and conducting Master Class to participate in one of seven focus groups. Demographic data was collected in the form of a written questionnaire before each focus group began. Four focus group questions were developed:

1. What elements in your musical training prepared you for what you have to do as a professional choral singer? How important is learning to sight-read? When did you learn to sight-read proficiently as a singer? How easily did it come to you?
2. I'm interested in how professional singers think about and use sight-reading in the rehearsal process. What sight-reading techniques do you incorporate into your professional singing? If you are asked to sight-read something at an audition, what process do you use? Where did you learn these particular strategies that you are describing? If you learned them on your own, how did you do it?
3. Do you teach sight-reading to your students? How did you decide on a methodology for teaching? What resources do you use? Do you believe that advanced sight-reading skills can be taught?
4. How do you think we should teach sight-reading to undergraduate choral singers in rehearsal settings? What skills do you think are the most important/useful?

Professional singers and conductors self-selected to participate in the study (N=48.) Aggregate demographic data showed a high level of graduate training in

music, the vast majority of participants between the ages of 25-44, and disparate states of residency. The majority of participants self-identified as choral conductors, music educators, and/ or private voice teachers in addition to professional singers and also reported high levels of instrumental proficiency. Most of the participants rated their vocal sight-reading skills as between above average and expert and slightly more than half rated their vocal sight-reading teaching skills as between above average and expert.

Focus group data revealed that the majority of participants developed proficiency in their sight-reading skills from instrumental study, aural skills and music theory classes, and through on-the-job training at a church job or other professional choral singing job. Participants mentioned a number of important skills necessary to succeed as a professional choral singer in addition to sight-reading, including solid vocal technique, a good ear, versatility, facility in languages, and access to a variety of vocal colors. Important personality traits included being punctual, prepared, reliable, a quick learner, easy to work with, determined, motivated, and able to form interpersonal connections. Experience, exposure, and opportunities were also listed as important components to launching one's career.

Sight-reading was listed as extremely important or perhaps the most important skill that a professional choral singer could develop. Participants indicated that strong sight-reading skills allow the singer to audition successfully and to be hired, and even more importantly, re-hired. They also allow the singer to save time learning repertoire and balancing a variety of jobs at once, be more flexible to the conductor's requests during the rehearsal process, achieve a higher level of music-making in a shorter



amount of time, and accomplish more difficult or newly composed music successfully.

When reading music during the rehearsal process, the data revealed two main strategies that professional singers used to interpret the pitches in their musical line: an intervallic approach and a harmonic approach. The intervallic approach is more linear and follows the line that the singer is sounding and the intervallic leaps that follow one another. The harmonic approach is more key-centered and pays more attention to what scale degree the singer might be singing in any specific key at any specific moment in the piece, being aware that the key center may change over the course of the piece. Some singers expressed that they use a primarily harmonic approach unless they are singing atonal music or music that changes key areas frequently, in which case they will switch to an intervallic approach. While some facility with the harmonic approach seems more helpful than a solely intervallic approach, some of the singers described only thinking in an intervallic way. Instrumentalists were more likely to describe facility with the harmonic approach to thinking about music, although it was not one-hundred percent correlated.

The data revealed that the participants used an individualized score marking system to identify problem spots and leave reminders in their music to prepare them for the next time they see that particular page. Score markings included writing in note names, rhythmic counts, solfege syllables, intervals (including whole steps, half steps, and repeated intervals), and up or down arrows to help find pitches. Participants reported using a variety of skills other than score marking to try to accurately find their pitches, such as “hanging on” to previously sung pitches, looking at other vocal

or instrumental lines, looking ahead, looking for patterns, looking at melodic contour, visualizing an instrument that they have studied, “feeling” the sensation of the notated pitch in the voice, humming, and filling in larger leaps with stepwise notes or smaller intervals. Participants also indicated that a thorough knowledge of different kinds of musical time periods and styles can help them make more intuitive “guesses” when sight-reading music by a familiar composer or from a familiar time period. Singers with “perfect pitch” indicated completely different approaches to sight-reading and rehearsing with an ensemble.

Participants mentioned different approaches to sight-reading in an audition situation. They first scan the excerpt. Some look for anchors in the melody and others look for anomalies in the melody and rhythm. Some focus on the rhythm and meter first and conduct as they scan, others focus on the key, tonality, and solfege syllables first. Some look for patterns and others look at the text or language of the excerpt. Many mentioned that the sight-reading in the audition is a test of character; many described feelings of fear and anxiety, some tell themselves to be confident, keep going, and remain calm. Some ask themselves what the excerpt is testing. Some mentioned that having to sight-read something with no rehearsal is not a realistic situation and some mentioned that their vocal technique goes away when they are put in this stressful situation.

Singers described learning these sight-reading techniques from a variety of sources. Some are self-taught, some were taught by conductors or peers, and many expressed using a mix of training and learning on the job out of necessity.

Some participants had taught sight-reading to their students at the K-12 level, college level, and/ or in their private voice studio. These participants used routine practice and ritual to regularly incorporate sight-reading into their teaching. Some participants mentioned positive or negative teaching cultures at their schools and how it significantly aided music literacy training if the culture already existed or impeded sight-reading training if it did not. Some participants asked the question of whether it was the job of the aural skills/ theory teacher, choral conductor, or voice teacher to teach sight-reading and most responded that it was everyone's job because it is such an important skill. Many participants teach solfege syllables to their students and some teach some of the specific sight-reading strategies mentioned by professional choral singers, such as trying to find your pitch from other vocal or instrumental lines or "feeling" the sensation of the notated pitch in the voice. Participants believe that sight-reading is a skill and therefore that advanced sight-reading skills can be taught, but some added the caveat that professional choral singers need skills other than just strong sight-reading skills to succeed, such as a strong vocal technique and a good ear. Participants use many different resources to teach sight-reading to their students, including methods books, hymnals, Bach cantatas, and current repertoire.

Participants suggested many different ideas about how best to teach sight-reading to the undergraduate choral ensemble. The top response was that sight-reading needed to be practiced consistently in order for students to improve. Other responses included developing personal accountability, independence, and empowering students by not playing their vocal parts on the piano and instead teaching them to use an A 440 tuning fork to find their starting pitches. Participants

encouraged discussing the real-life applications and monetary benefits of succeeding in aural skills/ theory classes and in becoming strong sight-readers to help students connect the dots between their studies and future success in their careers.

There was some discussion about the ultimate purpose of choir at the university level and whether it is to teach musicianship skills or produce excellent performances. Some conductors focus on the “process” of learning music and skill building while others focus on the “product” of the final performance and those two curriculum models can have incredibly different outcomes in the sight-reading levels of the students. Some participants argued for all-process focused choirs that do nothing but sight-read and skill-build while others believed that sight-reading should be taught outside of the choir rehearsal.

Conductors and teachers mentioned many challenges that get in the way of successfully teaching their students to sight-read. Some of these challenges included time restraints, students who are terrified of sight-reading, students of different sight-reading abilities in one ensemble, having no sight-reading leaders in the choir, the ability for weak readers to hide in choir, and that the conductors themselves do not remember ever learning how to sight-read.

Some participants mentioned specific aspects of rhythmic sight-reading, such as count-singing and kinesthetic movement in rehearsal. Several participants suggested trying to combine a variety of methods and approaches every day when teaching students in order to appeal to different kinds of learners and to try to develop a holistic approach to sight-reading.

## Conclusions

This project is the first systematic investigation into the professional use of sight-reading skills in a population of highly trained musicians who are intimately familiar with the high standards of professional choral singing. From these results, several conclusions can be drawn about professional choral singers' perceptions of the importance of sight-reading skills and effective pedagogy for teaching sight-reading to undergraduate choral ensemble singers.

It has been shown in many previous sight-reading studies that instrumental training is strongly correlated with better vocal sight-reading skills and that was also consistent in this study. What was not consistent among the participants was their undergraduate preparation and training. Participants' undergraduate choral and aural skills class experiences seemed to vary widely from state to state and from school to school. Some singers had an excellent aural skills sequence that brought their sight-reading skills to a high level and others reported that they never really sight-read in their aural skills classes because the teacher would tell them which examples to prepare for their assessments in advance. Choral ensemble experiences seemed to vary greatly as well, where some conductors went out of their way to hold students personally accountable in class by never playing their notes on a piano or by giving each student a tuning fork and others would "spoon-feed" notes from the piano during rehearsal. Methods such as never playing notes from the piano and giving students tuning forks force students to develop and rely on their aural skills training and sight-reading in order to keep up in class, while spoon-feeding notes does not. Some participants reported that they were never really put in a situation where they needed

to sight-read until their first church job (which sometimes was not until graduate school) and that they felt, and to some extent continue to feel, very far behind. Participants reported learning their sight-reading skills from a variety of sources; while some received training from teachers or conductors, many have had to develop these skills on their own out of necessity. It seems like college programs could do more to help students so that these skills will be more developed by the time they graduate.

It is clear from the data that sight-reading is a critically important skill for professional choral singers and that unsupported claims in the literature to the contrary are simply wrong. Fortunately, new literature has been published in the past three years that has begun to explore the skill set necessary for the successful professional choral singer and the importance of sight-reading has been discussed, at least in part, in these articles. This study was also able to reveal some important skills and personality traits other than sight-reading that are essential for professional choral singers to develop and possess, including solid vocal technique, a good ear, versatility, foreign language knowledge, and access to a variety of vocal colors. Personality traits include being prepared, a quick learner, punctual, reliable, easy to work with, determined, motivated, and able to form interpersonal connections. Experience, exposure, and opportunities were also listed as important components to launching one's career. These skills should also be kept in mind when training and advising undergraduate vocal performance majors.

The conclusions drawn about college training indicate that college-level conductors and educators could be doing much more to develop and train students in

the sight-reading skills that they will need to possess after they graduate. Part of this training would involve teaching students some of the score marking and other techniques that study participants described using regularly during the rehearsal process and encouraging ensemble members to come up with their own systems that work for them. (Some of this training could also be incorporated into aural skills classes, as well.)

Participants described two main strategies that they used to interpret the pitches in their musical line: an intervallic approach, a harmonic approach, or a combination of the two. Facility with a harmonic approach to thinking about music seems like an extremely important skill to have in order to work successfully as a professional choral singer, however many participants described a primarily intervallic approach to reading their vocal line. This indicates that it is possible to develop a highly attuned method of reading intervallically and singing at a high level, but it seems like the harmonic method would be a more helpful way to inform intonation and balancing of chords. If choral singers at the highest level are not uniformly thinking about music in a harmonic way, it seems like we as music educators have a challenging task to try to facilitate this way of thinking with our undergraduate music majors.

Participants also stressed the importance of connecting the dots for students between the skills that they are learning in their aural skills/ theory classes and choral ensembles to skills that will be expected of them in the professional world. Students have such a limited window of time to practice learning these skills in the safe and accepting environment of the “academy” and sometimes it just takes the teacher

mentioning how these skills will help students succeed for them to be able to see the value in these classes.

Participants indicated that the best way to improve sight-reading skills is to practice regularly, but they disagreed about whether or not the choral rehearsal was the best place to practice these skills. Some argue that there are too many different sight-reading levels and abilities in one room to be able to practice effectively in the choral rehearsal while others pushed for more professional training in college-level choirs by putting singers in mock professional situations regularly or even perhaps starting a sight-reading choir that has a skill building emphasis rather than a performance emphasis. In order to address the issue of having sight-readers of different levels in one ensemble, participants suggested creating different “tiers” of sight-reading to push more advanced readers while letting beginning sight-readers proceed at a more comfortable pace. One example of this could be asking beginners to read on solfege syllables while asking advanced readers to read on text or with dynamics. The differences of opinion about the purpose of choir go back to the fundamental question – is the purpose of the college-level choral ensemble to train musicians or to perform at the highest possible level? In even a relatively small sample size there were huge differences of opinion, so it might be useful to focus on that question first, as it is likely to dramatically alter the shape of the rest of the choral program.

Participants suggested trying to combine a variety of methods and approaches every day when teaching students in order to appeal to different kinds of learners and to try to develop a holistic approach to sight-reading. These approaches could involve



kinesthetic movement, composition, journaling about their experience, dictation, or incorporating creativity in the form of improvisation and games. These suggestions seem like a good way of varying the way that sight-reading is taught and engaging more students in the process.

### *Strengths and Limitations*

Participants in this study were limited to members of the 2015 Oregon Bach Festival's professional Berwick Chorus and conducting Master Class. Opinions were sought on how to best teach sight-reading regardless of whether or not the participant had any teaching background or experience teaching sight-reading. Conductors were also asked to reflect on their training and use of sight-reading in their work regardless of whether or not they self-identified as professional singers.

Limitations of the questionnaire included failure to ask participants to disclose sex and race to contribute to demographic data. Future studies might want to explore issues of race and class in this unique population of individuals.

Strengths of the study included diversity in the participant pool. Participants possessed a great variety of performing and teaching backgrounds and resided in many different locations, representing twenty states and two countries.

### **Recommendations**

As this was a qualitative research study, the sample size was too small to draw significant conclusions about the experience of all professional choral singers.

However, I am hoping that this study will serve as an exploratory investigation into the field of professional-level choral singing and sight-reading preparation that can be

used as a starting point for further study, including perhaps a future quantitative study of professional choral singers. Future studies could involve a random sample survey to get a national picture of the professional choral singer experience or randomized trials with choral students to see what methods mentioned by participants in this study prove most effective as teaching tools.

Further research could include investigating when and how professional choral singers use an intervallic versus a harmonic approach when rehearsing or sight-reading music. The harmonic approach to reading seems superior in many ways, but there still seem to be numerous barriers for some singers to conceptualizing music in that way. It seems like it would be useful to figure out who does and who does not read harmonically and why in order to better understand and teach this skill.

It might be interesting to further investigate the role that “perfect” or absolute pitch has on professional choral singing. Some areas of investigation could include what percentage of the professional choral population has perfect pitch or relative pitch and how it helps or hinders reading skills in auditions and rehearsals. While only a small percentage of university students probably have perfect pitch, these students would have completely different needs that would need to be addressed, such as how to cope with different tuning systems, ensemble lowering or raising of pitch in unaccompanied music, and how to teach students without perfect pitch if they decide to become music educators.

University level educators should ensure that they are teaching and practicing consistent sight-reading systems between departments so students can augment their skills throughout their time in the degree program. While it is not always possible, it

would be useful for K-12 and college music educators in similar areas to coordinate their teaching methods and approaches in order to minimize the number of times that students would have to learn new sight-reading systems.

College teachers should stay connected to the constantly changing world of professional music making to make sure that they are preparing pre-professional students with the current and relevant skills that they will need to succeed after they graduate. Current areas of concentration would include professional singing skills, strong sight-reading skills, audition strategies, and methods for score marking and responding to the needs of the conductor in rehearsal.

#### *Personal Approach*

I learned a great deal from my incredible colleagues while moderating these focus group sessions and found that their ideas, experiences, and suggestions prompted me to think more critically about my own practicing and teaching. In my own singing in the months since the focus groups took place, I found that I have been pushing myself to prepare more of my music away from the piano in order to build my reading skills and challenge my ear. This requires a great deal of patience and is time-consuming, but I think it is a great way to continue to strengthen my sight-reading skills. I have also been thinking more consciously about whether I am approaching music harmonically or intervallically in rehearsal and have been trying to be more fully aware of the underlying key area in the music at all times, rather than only when the key area is more intuitive.

As a future choral director at the college level, I have been thinking about how to structure my choral program in a way that will prepare students to succeed in the

professional choral world after college. The big picture ideas that I took away from the focus groups were less about specific approaches to teaching sight-reading and more about the broader goals of the choral department and music school. The three larger philosophical questions raised in the focus groups included: Is music literacy an important goal or part of the teaching culture of the school? Whose job is it to teach sight-reading? Is the goal of the choral department to build strong musicians or to put on performances of the highest caliber? These questions will probably already be answered for me when I first arrive at a school, but I think it is important to think about how I would ideally answer them so that I know what I am trying to work toward as I structure my program.

The question of teaching culture is challenging because it most directly has to do with the opinions of the people who came before you and those who are currently working at the school. It is possible to build a school culture of music literacy and sight-reading training, but if it did not exist at all when you arrived, it will probably take many years to “convince” the students, faculty, administration, and parents of its importance. Participants mentioned how exhausting it is to try to convince students every day that sight-reading is important. Several participants mentioned that it was easiest to build a culture of music literacy with the incoming class (the class that never knew things any other way) and that in their fifth year of teaching they finally had things structured the way they envisioned. That is a time-consuming process, but it is probably the only way to make significant change at a school where a strong sight-reading culture does not exist. I think it is important to come into my first year with clearly defined goals about sight-reading proficiency and ideas about how to

reach them so that I can make my expectations about the importance of sight-reading clear from day one. Students will probably accept the changes more quickly if I am confident in my approach and show that I have a clear method of getting there.

To the question of whose job is it to teach sight-reading, I personally think that it is everyone's job. Sight-reading and music literacy seem so crucial and so fundamental that all teachers should try to find a way to strengthen and expand the skills of all of their students regularly and in whatever ways they can. Obviously, the choral director, aural skills teacher, and private voice instructor have many things that they need to teach other than sight-reading, but it seems like we should all make it a goal to spend a few minutes out of every hour to incorporate some aspects of sight-reading teaching into our lesson.

However, the choral director has the unique ability to be able to ask singers to sight-read within a choral, or multi-voice, framework. Unlike the aural skills teacher and private voice instructor, who usually ask singers to read only one vocal line (perhaps with a piano accompaniment,) choral directors can allow singers to sight-read together as a choir. In this situation, not only does the singer need to read correct pitches and rhythms, but sight-reading a vocal line in a choral setting presents balance and intonation issues that strengthen the ear. The singer also cannot slow or stop the pulse, because they will lose rhythmic precision with the rest of the choir if they do. This kind of sight-reading is most similar to what a singer will have to do in a professional choral capacity, such as in a church job or other professional choral engagement and will help prepare singers for that task.

The purpose of choir seems to be an important question that will determine many elements of the choral program. Is the goal of the program more performance oriented or more geared toward skill building and musicianship training? I think at the K-12 level, the goal is much more clearly skill building and training, to the point where teachers only program a few pieces for each concert. This gives the teachers plenty of time to incorporate skill building and training in their curriculum. On the other hand, the goal of professional choirs is to perform at the highest possible level. The college choral program falls somewhere in between, creating more of a gray area. All college choral conductors want to perform at the highest possible level, but I think we owe it to our students to balance the curriculum with skill building and training as well, especially with our less advanced groups. It is important to assess the skills of the students each year and make sure that we are meeting their needs. Are there gaps in their training that we should prioritize this semester? Is there a hole in their knowledge of choral literature from a certain era? Since we have four years with these students, it is important that we think about the music that we are programming and the skills that we are building to create well-balanced, intelligent musicians who are ready for the professional music world. While it is challenging to achieve, I think that we must strive for a good balance between high levels of performance and musicianship training in our college choral program.

Participants discussed specific sight-reading training methods in addition to big picture ideas and I think they had many excellent ideas that I plan to incorporate into my teaching. As sight-reading is a critical part of most choral auditions, both amateur and professional, I plan to make sight-reading a regular and consistent part of

the rehearsal process. I will coordinate solfege and rhythm systems with the theory department and include a sight-reading component to the annual choral audition. I plan to apply sight-reading techniques to the repertoire as much as possible and speak to students about the importance of developing strong sight-reading skills. I plan to help students develop a system of score marking by presenting different score marking approaches and discussing the importance of a fast and varied score marking system. I will try to foster a harmonic approach to reading music by weaving in elements of music theory, chord balancing and tuning, and aural skills into my warm-ups and rehearsals.

The careful selection of repertoire seems critical to creating well-rounded choral musicians, so I will try to program music from many different time periods in order to familiarize ensemble members with different vocal colors and musical styles. I think that it is important to ask collegiate ensembles for different vocal colors that reflect performance practice and historical style. However, it is especially important to consider the vocal health of these young, developing singers in these moments and to monitor strain and vocal fatigue while teaching them how to monitor their own levels of vocal fatigue as well.

I will strive to include different methods of sight-reading training to address different learning styles, including sight-reading with solfege, count-singing, scanning and marking the score before sight-reading together, using a pitch ladder, ear-training exercises, incorporating kinesthetic movement, composition, journaling, dictation, and incorporating creativity in the form of improvisation and games. Some of these ideas are a little outside of my comfort zone as a teacher, but I think that it is

important that I expand my “toolbox” in order to engage students more deeply in the learning process.

I am encouraged by the renewed interest in sight-reading pedagogy, recent sight-reading studies and publications, and the endless enthusiasm that I have received toward this topic and field of research. I think that we could be approaching a time of greater understanding about how to teach sight-reading successfully to all learners and that our collected strategies and research will translate into more well-rounded, versatile singers and successful future choral music professionals.



## APPENDIX A: IRB ACCEPTANCE LETTER PAGE 1



1204 Marie Mount Hall  
College Park, MD 20742-5125  
TEL 301.405.4212  
FAX 301.314.1475  
irb@umd.edu  
www.umresearch.umd.edu/IRB

DATE: May 18, 2015

TO: Rachel Carlson  
FROM: University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [750879-1] Teaching sight-reading to undergraduate choral ensemble singers:  
lessons from successful learners

REFERENCE #:  
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED  
APPROVAL DATE: May 18, 2015  
EXPIRATION DATE: May 17, 2016  
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 6 & 7

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Prior to submission to the IRB Office, this project received scientific review from the departmental IRB Liaison.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulations.

This project has been determined to be a Minimal Risk project. Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of May 17, 2016.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Unless a consent waiver or alteration has been approved, Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others (UPIRSOs) and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

## Appendix A: IRB Acceptance letter page 2

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of seven years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Office at 301-405-4212 or [irb@umd.edu](mailto:irb@umd.edu). Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB's records.

## APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear Berwick Chorus,

For those of you who don't know me, I am excited to be returning to the Berwick Chorus for my fourth summer and am writing to you with a request. I am starting the third and final year of my DMA Choral Conducting program at the University of Maryland this fall and will be writing my dissertation this year. After much thought, I decided to explore how we teach sight-reading to undergraduate choral ensemble singers and I invite each of you to participate in my study!

I will be creating a number of 5-8 person focus groups, each of which will meet one time for 1.5 hrs. to discuss sight-reading techniques: how you incorporate them into your singing, how some of you teach them to your students, and what might be the best ways to teach them to undergraduates who want to pursue professional choral singing some day. I will ask you to fill out a one page anonymous questionnaire at the beginning of the focus group session to collect relevant background information and demographics and I will make an audio recording of each session to inform my writing, but I will not refer to any of you by name. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and there will be no hard feelings if you do not wish to participate.

I am looking for both professional singers who primarily perform and singers who also consider themselves to be choral conductors/ music educators (especially if you teach your students to sight-read!)

If you would like to be a part of my study, please click on the following link to fill out a Google form:  
[https://docs.google.com/forms/d/13\\_WRXrrSs7835lTqCayWVfctX0Lsi520oYJAEok\\_IqU/viewform?usp=send\\_form](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/13_WRXrrSs7835lTqCayWVfctX0Lsi520oYJAEok_IqU/viewform?usp=send_form). If Google forms are not your thing and you would rather just email me directly, that is fine as well. It would be ideal if you could get back to me by 6/22 so that I have time to finalize groups.

Thank you for your participation! I am looking forward to making fantastic music with you this summer.

Rachel Carlson

*This study is in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor in Musical Arts from the University of Maryland, under the direction of Dr. Edward Maclary.*

Appendix B: Recruitment letter page 2

Text within the Google Form:

I have 2 follow up questions to help me with scheduling:

1. How would you categorize yourself?

- Primarily a performer
- Primarily a conductor/ educator
- Equal parts performer and conductor/ educator
- Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

2. Out of the following dates and times, when are you available for a focus group session? Please check all possible times. Focus groups will take place in the School of Music and you will only be scheduled for one session.

- Fri. 6/26, 12:30-2:00 pm
- Sat. 6/27, 3:30-5:00 pm
- Mon. 6/29, 7:00-8:30 pm (some OBF reauditions are scheduled during this time)
- Tues. 6/30, 7:00-8:30 pm
- Fri. 7/3, 7:00-8:30 pm
- Mon. 7/6, 10:30 am-12:00 pm
- Sat. 7/11, 3:00-4:30 pm (some OBF reauditions will be scheduled from 3-5 pm)
- I am available for all of these times
- I am available for none of these times

Please let me know if you have any additional questions or comments (including if you are unsure about your availability or if you have a preference for or against certain dates and times listed above.)

## APPENDIX C: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

### Oral Script – Statement of Consent

Good afternoon and thank you for being here. My name is Rachel Carlson. I am a DMA student in choral conducting from the University of Maryland and am the Principal Investigator of this study.

The purpose of this study is to investigate effective strategies for teaching sight-reading skills to choral ensemble singers at the undergraduate level. I am inviting you to participate in this research project because you have been identified as a professional singer, choral conductor, or music educator.

The procedure involves grouping interested participants into 5-8 person focus groups that will meet for one and a half hours. I will administer a brief written questionnaire to gather demographic data and relevant background information and then begin the focus group session. I will lead a discussion about what sight-reading practices you use as a professional singer and how to best teach sight-reading to undergraduate choral singers.

I will be making an audio recording of these sessions to inform my writing, but will not refer to any of you by name. I will store these audio files on my password-protected laptop and keep the anonymous questionnaires secured in a filing cabinet in my home office to keep them confidential.

There are no risks or benefits from participating in this research study. Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time and there will be no penalties if you decide not to participate. If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints, please contact me by email at any time at \_\_\_\_\_@gmail.com.

Do you have any questions?

Your verbal agreement indicates that you are at least 18 years of age, your questions have been answered to your satisfaction, and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

## APPENDIX D: QUESTIONNAIRE

### Focus Group Questionnaire

**Education** (what degree(s)/ concentration(s) and from what institution(s)?):

**What is your age?**

- |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 18-24 years old | <input type="checkbox"/> 35-44 years old | <input type="checkbox"/> 55-64 years old   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 25-34 years old | <input type="checkbox"/> 45-54 years old | <input type="checkbox"/> 65 years or older |

**City and State** in which you reside: \_\_\_\_\_

**Country**, if outside of the United States: \_\_\_\_\_

**Do you consider yourself to be a** (check all that are applicable):

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Professional Singer   | <input type="checkbox"/> Music Educator (what level?) _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Amateur Singer        | <input type="checkbox"/> Professional Instrumentalist       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Choral Conductor      | <input type="checkbox"/> Composer                           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Orchestral Conductor  | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify): _____      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Private Voice Teacher |   |

**At what age did you start studying voice privately?** \_\_\_\_\_

**For how many years have you been singing professionally?** \_\_\_\_\_

**What is your piano proficiency** (non-existent, beginner, intermediate, advanced) **and at what age did you begin study?**

**Other than voice and piano, do you have any other primary or secondary instruments?**  
**Please list them, your skill level** (beginner, intermediate, advanced), **and at what age you began private lessons.**

**How would you describe your vocal sight-reading skills?**

- |                                    |  |                                  |
|------------------------------------|--|----------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Expert    | <input type="checkbox"/> Above Average | <input type="checkbox"/> Minimal |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Excellent | <input type="checkbox"/> Average       |                                  |

**If applicable, how would you describe your skill at teaching vocal sight-reading?**

- |                                    |  |                                  |
|------------------------------------|--|----------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Expert    | <input type="checkbox"/> Above Average | <input type="checkbox"/> Minimal |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Excellent | <input type="checkbox"/> Average       |                                  |

**Think about when you first learned to sight-read. Briefly describe where, when, and how you learned to sight-read proficiently.**

## APPENDIX E: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. What elements in your musical training prepared you for what you have to do as a professional choral singer?

How important is learning to sight-read? (alternately: You all mentioned sight-reading. Why is sight-reading so important?)

When did you learn to sight-read proficiently as a singer? How easily did it come to you?

2. I'm interested in how professional singers think about and use sight-reading in the rehearsal process. What sight-reading techniques do you incorporate into your professional singing?

If you are asked to sight-read something at an audition, what process do you use?

Let's say you are in a professional choral rehearsal and you keep missing a note in a specific passage. The conductor runs that passage two more times to fix an unrelated problem. Can you talk about what strategies you use in the subsequent run-throughs to accurately find and sing that note?

Where did you learn these particular strategies that you are describing? If you learned them on your own, how did you do it?

3. Do you teach sight-reading to your students? How did you decide on a methodology for teaching? What resources do you use?

Do you believe that advanced sight-reading skills can be taught?

Some students succeed at sight-reading quickly while others struggle. What do you think accounts for this disparity? What do you do to help those students who are struggling?

Describe the differences in teaching in group situations versus one on one.

4. How do you think we should teach sight-reading to undergraduate choral singers in rehearsal settings? What skills do you think are the most important/ useful?

What about beginners? What about students on a professional track?

Describe the connection between musicianship skills and success. Can you be successful without them?

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