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Choral Improvisation: Tensions and Resolutions

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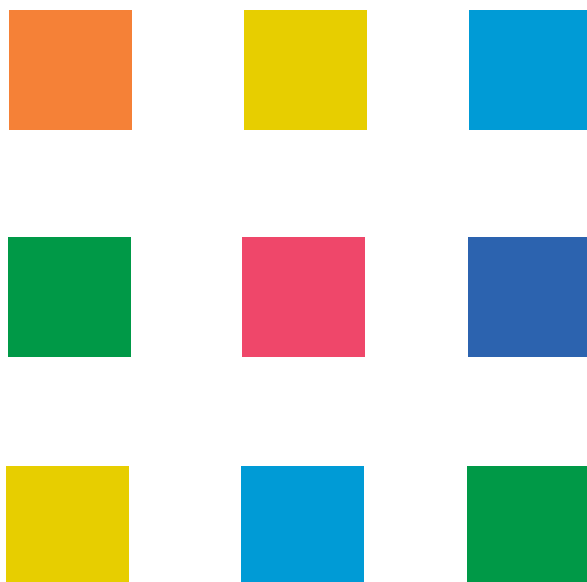
Freer, P. K. (2010). Choral Improvisation: Tensions and Resolutions. *Choral Journal*, 51(5), 18-31.

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Choral Improvisation

TENSIONS AND RESOLUTIONS

Patrick K. Freer

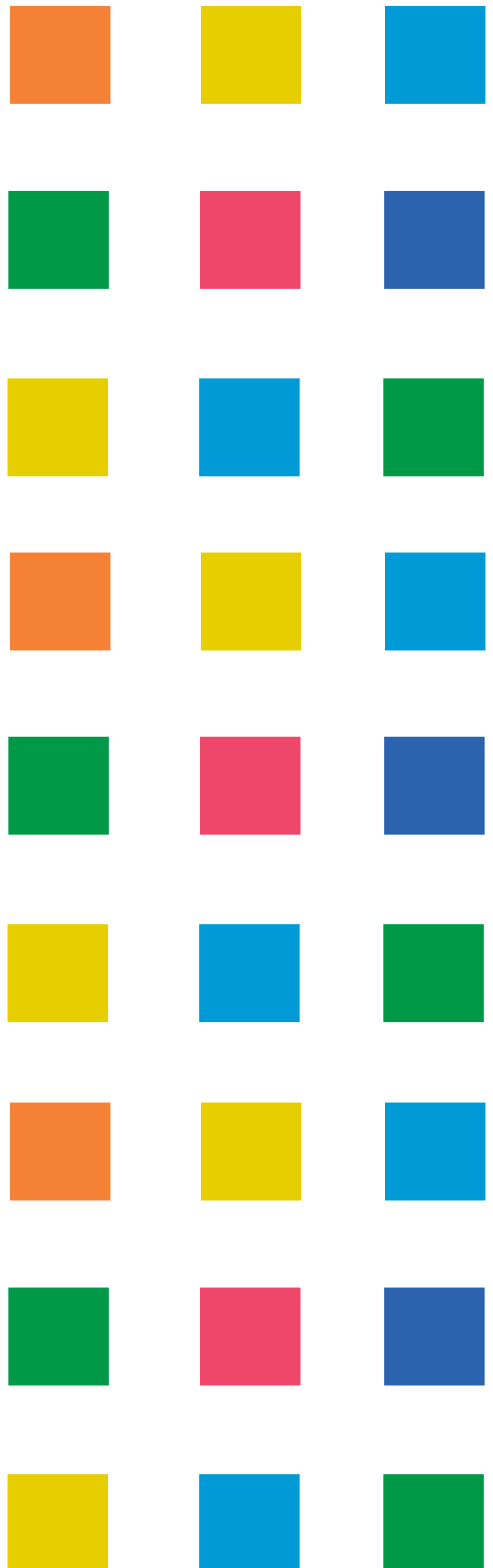


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An Anecdote and A Question

On the evening before submitting this article, the author—and 50,000 neighbors—attended an outdoor concert by Paul McCartney. When Sir Paul and his band led the crowd in a massive sing-along of the signature riff in *Hey Jude*, a group of men behind me spontaneously initiated a good-natured vocal improvisation contest around the melodic material. The result was an incredibly complex display of raw vocal agility, rhythmic inventiveness, and sheer enjoyment. The episode spoke volumes about the musical possibilities of amateur singers when uninhibited by pre-conceived standards and limitations. All these fellows needed was a harmonic and durational context (along with a little nip from the bottle, no doubt).

After this vocal display, one could not help but wonder whether members of this author's university men's chorus have the same opportunities to improvise within their twice-weekly rehearsals. Why are conductors reluctant to include improvisation within the choral experience when it offers so many possible benefits, not the least of which is enjoyment? Potential barriers include conductors' unfamiliarity with how to appraise spontaneous musical creation, questions about the appropriateness of improvisation within choral curricula and performance goals, and lack of understanding about the basic nature of improvisation pedagogy and guidelines for its implementation. These barriers may be surmounted if conductors see enough value in improvisational endeavors, including the ability to teach and engage musically without reliance on standard notation, the ability for musical material to flexibly reflect to the vocal skills of singers, and the potential for successful improvisation experiences to influence musical self-esteem and long-term perseverance in choral music.



Choral Improvisation

Addressing these barriers and accessing these benefits suggests continued evolution in the conductor's role from its stereotypical authoritarian conception to one of authoritative mentor; much as the benevolent master passes her craftsmanship to the apprentice. This article offers recommendations from theory and research about the developing of improvisational skills while varying within the existing structure of the choral warm-up session, with specific content according to the stylistic demands of the repertoire and the instructional content selected by the conductor.

Most choral conductors would probably agree that improvisation is a worthwhile activity, and that we should include it within our curricula and concerts. Yet, improvisation perhaps constitutes the skill area that choral conductors address most superficially—when it is introduced at all. Few choral music teachers and conductors have not personally engaged in improvisatory experiences beyond a rudimentary exposure to vocal jazz improvisation.¹ As a result, choral improvisation is frequently relegated to the purview of jazz specialists. This niche approach is particularly understandable

when emphasis is placed solely on the performance of repertoire composed within non-improvisatory traditions.²

There are many theoretical and practical guides detailing developmental and pedagogical perspectives on improvisation with potential application to choral music instruction. However, few of these resources address the most basic of problems: how to approach improvisation *within* the choral art rather than as an imposed curricular focus emanating from outside the choral art. This article explores this curricular dilemma and several related problems, suggesting solutions that lie within the structure of choral music instruction, rehearsal, and performance.

Choral Jazz Improvisation versus Jazz Improvisation

A distinction must be made at the outset between the broad topic of choral improvisation and the more focused matter of choral jazz improvisation. For the purposes of this article, choral jazz improvisation is considered a category within the broader topic of choral improvisation. The wider

subject encompasses vocal improvisations made by children in general music classes and by adolescents engaged in innovative music education projects such as the CONNECT ensembles at the Guildhall School in London, England. It ranges from the improvisatory choral songs made famous by Alice Parker and Nick Page to the highly refined, improvised vocal lines in choral compositions such as Sarah Hopkins' "Past Life Melodies": from the free improvisations of Bobby McFerrin's Voicestra, to scat singing within jazz standards. Though the genres and styles may differ, each offers contexts and parameters for individual choice and vocal displays. Each improvisatory opportunity affords what Richard Sennett referred to as craftsmanship, when "making is thinking,"³ and what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi labeled "the merger of action and awareness."⁴ It is the individual improvisatory act, at once cognitive, corporeal, and affective, that is uniquely liberating for performers and listeners. It is also one of the reasons that the notion of choral improvisation can be intimidating for conductors accustomed to managing the minute intricacies of choral performances.

Acts of improvisation with and for others historically preceded the preservation of musical intent through notation. Improvisation remains predominant within musical idioms centered upon communal interaction, individual expression, and the transmission of musical ideas through modeling and imitation.⁵ As such, improvisation has strong ties to musics emanating from global popular and folk traditions, and it has been a core component of Western choral/vocal music of several periods including, especially, the Baroque and modern eras. Many of the principal improvisatory characteristics of African music are evidenced in the choral arrangements of African-American spirituals considered standard repertory for North American high school and collegiate ensembles.⁶ Each of these idioms is variously dependent upon the collaborative creative activities of performers as they think, play, and sing.⁷

Much recent scholarship has explored the contradictions between the stereotypically authorian model of choral rehearsing

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and current theory about individual learning and group collaborations.⁸ Even the most progressive of critics, however, do not affirm the conductor's responsibilities to the composer, the score, and the choral tradition—they object primarily to the methods conductors often use to carry out these responsibilities.⁹ A secondary objection, though, concerns the nature of music presented to choristers. This concern is evidenced when repertoire is selected as performance material only, without regard for what it can teach singers to apply across the panoply of potential music endeavors. It is, instead, toward a future-oriented conception of choral instruction that proponents of improvisation offer suggestions for pedagogy and performance. If choral instruction is to be principally concerned with developing the skills of individual singers, then improvisation's focus on personal choice and vocal technique would seem to be a logical enterprise.

Potential Obstacles

Presented by Choral Improvisation

Success in choral music is most publicly measured by performance quality of pre-composed repertoire, whether sung by an elementary chorus in a school auditorium, a college choir at a choral conductors' convention, or a professional choral ensemble recording. Less public are the successes of individual singers that enable the overall choir's increasing level of artistry. One definition of "chorus" is a group of people engaged in simultaneous action, and it is often the conductor's responsibility to coordinate the individual efforts of a multitude of singers toward a singular aural realization of a notated musical composition. A core function of choral conductors is to honor the composer's original intent both vertically, in the moment-to-moment alignment of voice parts, and horizontally, in the progression of sound through time. Assuring the vertical and horizontal integrity of choral singing is tremendously complex and requires a multitude of skills and sensitivities that can a conductor can hone over time. The goal is nearly always definable as breathing musi-

cal life into otherwise inert markings of ink on paper.

What, then, are choral conductors to make of improvisation? Momentarily setting aside the discussion of its aesthetic elements, choral improvisation occurs without notation, relying instead on contextual and motivic materials to guide its development.¹⁰ Though we use the phrase "choral improvisation," it is individually vocal, often demonstrated as a solo or occasionally as a loosely structured heterophony of multiple singers. Conductors may sense, understandably, tension between the identifiable correctness of musical re-creation and the ambiguous correctness of spontaneous musical creation.

Objectives of traditional performance are clearly defined, perceived, and assessed. Objectives of improvisational performance may be similarly enumerated, but many choral conductors are either unaware of the criteria, are inexperienced in the medium, or simply reject improvisation as a necessary component of the choral experience.

Suitability of Content

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ensembles in the United States already prioritize among components of music education when they choose to deemphasize, for example, National Standard #2 (playing alone and with others a variety of instruments).¹¹ We might be tempted to take the same position regarding improvisation. However, expansion of the choral repertoire to include culturally and musically authentic representations of global and popular music traditions forces us to include vocal improvisation experiences. The genres where improvisation is an essential element are already present on many of our concert programs, including spirituals, gospel, jazz, blues, and popular musics—not to mention the vocal improvisations that are integral to the many global music traditions now represented within our repertoire. We implicitly assume responsibility for the development of vocal improvisation skills when we select these genres for our choral ensembles.

We are accustomed to rehearsing even the smallest nuance with our choirs, first to learn the material, and then to encode it

within memory so that we can be reasonably assured of a correct performance each time it is revisited. As architect Renzo Piano stated, "This is very typical of the craftsman's approach. You think and you do at the same time You do it, you redo it, and you redo it again."¹² Still, the common measures of quality our rehearsals are intended to fulfill are positioned in potential conflict with some measures of quality in vocal improvisation. Certainly there are comparable standards of vocal technique, pitch and rhythmic precision, and stylistic appropriateness. Standards specific to vocal improvisation, but less applicable to standard choral repertoire, may address the flexibility, originality, and elaboration of rhythmic, melodic, and tonal material.¹³ Rather than being fixed and predetermined, these types of contextually-applied standards reflect a suppleness and fluidity required of vocal improvisation. Such improvisation is simultaneously responsive to the musical moment and reflective of a knowledge-skill base that renders the singer capable of translating such responsiveness

into vocalizations.

But, where do these seemingly intangible and potentially conflicting sets of standards, knowledge components and skills reside? Though the conductor-teacher may guide her singers toward subtle applications of musical knowledge and skills, it is the singers themselves who must recognize and seize opportunities for transforming musical material through improvisation. In this, they can only be generally guided by normative standards, written explanatory material, and inert musical notation as generalized guidance. Once the improvisatory activity begins, it proceeds as a perpetual amalgam of thinking and doing.¹⁴ For conductors accustomed to seeking a faithful, "correct" rendering of choral scores, the situational and contextualized nature of vocal improvisation challenges the traditional power structure of conductor-centered ensembles. Replacing the traditional, rigid structure is one defined by negotiation and flexibility—an atmosphere where conductors and students function as co-musicians rather than as leader and followers.

A one-size-fits-all set of quality standards cannot be applied to both traditional choral work and vocal improvisation, yet choral conductors may find themselves in the position of having to include improvisatory material in their concerts without confidence in their ability to assess the musical product or assist the singer in a stylistically meaningful manner. What is the resulting relationship between singer and conductor; and how might it serve both musical and educational purposes? Choral conductors are typically accustomed to providing vocal models and carefully considered sets of stylistic parameters, yet they may find themselves relying on the singer's own musical experience and sensibilities when exploring vocal improvisation in an unfamiliar genre. This reliance on singers may be disconcerting to conductors accustomed to working within traditional leader-centered ensembles. Yes, improvisation provides a unique opportunity for singers to independently apply what they've learned from their conductors. Might it also create opportunities for conductors to learn from their singers' musical capabilities and affinities—those musical characteristics that



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are rarely acknowledged within the traditional rehearsal environment and repertoire of choral ensembles? In these instances, the choral setting could become rich with possibilities for a bi-directional negotiation between singers and conductors such that the boundaries of those roles may be blurred or made indistinguishable.

Although such occurrences may begin to address issues of democracy and equity, at least momentarily, they may also offer an elegant way for conductors to acknowledge their own limitations regarding improvisation. Choral conductors may not personally possess the experiential background or vocal skill to serve as experts in either a particular style or performance of vocal improvisation. When the conductor moves beyond an authoritarian stance to the more authoritative role of coach or mentor, she may begin to allow the transmission of ideas between choral musicians, temporarily setting aside labels of “singer” and “conductor.” This merger of roles is, quite happily, the same merger of action and awareness required during vocal improvisation. Could it be that the success of vocal improvisations within choral settings is tied to the conductor’s ability to restructure the ensemble’s power structure? What could emerge, then, would be an environment that is flexible and adaptive to both the styles of music being performed and their characteristic pedagogical techniques.

Each of us has likely witnessed choral performances in which soloists are called upon to improvise in spiritual, gospel, or popular idioms. The improvisatory work is occasionally a display of brilliance, an example of musical thinking in action. All too often, however, the result is cringe-inducing despite the best efforts of the soloist. Though the soloist unfailingly provokes an ovation from audiences, whether for artistry or sheer bravery, the conductor is ultimately responsible for guiding the improvisatory efforts of his or her singers toward success. While we may not be as vocally or stylistically proficient as our soloists, we need to know and be able to guide the essence of the improvisatory work appropriate for each instance.

How can choral conductors approach vocal improvisation when they lack the confidence to provide a stylistically ap-

propriate vocal model? One approach, a “solution” in this case, would be to avoid programming repertoire that includes any type of vocal improvisation. This approach would be a disservice to our students who live in an increasingly diverse musical world, and it would be a disservice to the choral art that is far more variegated than most of us were trained to lead. Our profession’s lack of improvisatory training should not be construed as a criticism of the collegiate music programs that prepare future choral conductors. The foundational education provided by conservatories and university music schools is simply that: foundational. Conductors are professionally obliged to become versed in the repertoire presented to their choirs. A second approach, then, would be to become skillful in one improvisational genre, programming new types of improvisatory experiences as the conductor’s own skill set expands to encompass additional styles over time.¹⁵

Another way to concretize a workable approach would be to consider what our audiences don’t know about improvisation. For instance, we customarily have soloists step to the forward portion of performance spaces to enhance audibility and promote engagement with audiences. Beyond the magnetism of the soloist, though, to what exactly is the audience expected to respond?

Choral conductors might provide audiences with information about a program’s improvisatory work, offering a general background of the style as well as specific details concerning melodic and/or rhythmic motifs, harmonic or durational parameters, text, or form. Knowledge of the improvisatory work will help audiences to appreciate what might otherwise be seen as vocal pyrotechnics. Sennett refers to this process as “unpacking what’s buried in the vault of tacit knowledge,” or making clear what might be obscured.¹⁶ This act of conceptual unpacking may prove helpful for conductors searching for precise language and demonstrable musical gestures through which to guide and describe vocal improvisation for singers and audiences alike.¹⁷

Varying Definitions

If it seems that one concern of choral conductors regarding improvisation relates to an unfamiliarity with its quality standards, an allied concern is confusion over what the term “improvisation” really means.¹⁸ Musicologist Carl Dalhaus offered,

The concept of improvisation is almost as difficult to pin down as is the musical practice which it designates Nothing is certain except the trivial fact that the

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basic trait which distinguishes improvisation from composition is lack of notation [There is] a feature which we instinctively associate with the idea of improvisation: spontaneity and uniqueness, and the fact that they are tied to a non-recurring situation. Improvisations which [sic] are repeated are for this reason alone no longer improvisations.¹⁹

We see in Dalhaus' comments that improvisation is to be new in each undertaking of the improvised moment. Having a soloist listen to a recording of an improvised solo with the intention of recreating it during performance is not improvisation. Rather, it is "copying," a term Lucy Green popularized through her studies of how popular musicians learn from recordings with the intent to repeat them.²⁰

Christopher Azzara surveyed the research literature and found that improvisation can be broadly defined as a process of (1) spontaneously expressing musical thoughts and feelings, (2) making music within certain understood guidelines, and (3) engaging in musical conversation.²¹ The idea of musical conversation may be the most elusive of these descriptors, for the conversation is between only the ongoing musical material and the improvising singer. The conductor is, in the moment of performance, a bystander. How might the conductor transition from the leader

role early in the rehearsal process to that of facilitator as performances approach? In the rehearsals and coaching sessions that precede an improvised performance, the conductor's role might be one of a mentor offering support as necessary, with a gradual withdrawal that encourages singers to take risks independently and attend to the temporality of each musical moment. Derek Bailey maintains that improvisation "invites complete involvement, to a degree otherwise unobtainable, in the act of music-making."²² Though consideration of the musical experience of individual singers may seem contrary to the collaborative goals of ensemble performance, David Lines offers,

From an educational point of view, learning to improvise enables a musician to explore new expressions of what is 'musical.' Being at the conscious 'edge' of musical creation while in performance provides musicians and listeners with opportunities to gain insights into the nature and value of the musical experience.²³

However, research also suggests that when improvising, members of musical ensembles require guidance from their conductors to avoid the possibility that deep concentration may progress to one-dimensional self-absorption instead of an optimal, heightened sense of awareness of the multilateral musical conversation.²⁴

The second of Azzara's characteristics of improvisation, making music within certain understood guidelines, is also potentially problematic for choral conductors. When we assume the mantle of improvisatory coach, we need to use language that conveys intentions with precision and clarity. Much of the standard notated choral repertory comes to us replete with highly descriptive terminology and indicators of appropriate performance practice. These descriptors draw upon what are commonly known as "elements" of music such as melody, harmony, rhythm, timbre, texture, form and dynamics. These terms are most often culturally specific to Western art music traditions, and they are at best imprecise when directed

toward improvisational musics derived from other traditions. Musical anthropologist John Blacking commented that with regard to these elements, "Music is often generated by non-musical rules, and the metalanguage commonly used in musical analyses may in fact hinder the development of musical grammars because it is culture-specific and irrelevant to understanding many of the world's musics."²⁵

Choral conductors need to develop a variety of ways to describe musical gesture and technique in relation to the context of specific improvisatory practices. Though we may develop facility and specialty in some areas, it is unrealistic to expect that choral conductors can become bona fide experts in each genre of literature we choose for our choirs. Michele Kaschub and Janice Smith propose a potential approach through the designation of musical principles that are "universally present, employed through cultural definition and individually interpreted and experienced."²⁶ The basis for these five principles is the body-mind experience of music rather than analytical descriptors of musical structure: sound/silence, motion/stasis, unity/variety, tension/release, and stability/instability.²⁷ These principles may be expressed through the traditional terminology of musical elements, depending on the cultural and contextual milieu of the music being considered.²⁸ Might choral conductors find that improvisatory work can be guided through descriptions of musical events in terms of broad principles, only subsequently referencing more specific analytical elements, perhaps grouped as elements of time, pitch, and expression?²⁹ Lines suggests that the use of such inclusive terminology may enable musicians to more easily engage with the "characteristics of the musical moment encapsulated by improvisation—unpredictability and freedom."³⁰

Probable Benefits of Choral Improvisation

What musical and non-musical benefits might be identified to support a rationale for the inclusion of vocal improvisation within the choral experience and/or the cur-



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riculum of school choral ensembles? Might the essential feature of improvisation—its lack of notation—render it accessible to all people without the precondition of formal musical study? Whereas notational expertise is necessary for decoding and realizing pre-composed repertoire, improvisation requires a pragmatic expertise that facilitates practicable, proximal, and responsive interactions with music and musicians, but without a reliance on notation. Such expertise is frequently born of repeated exposure to certain types of music with friends and family. Much like the collaborative music-making that can occur in traditional choral rehearsals, improvisation can be as much a

democratic, social endeavor as a musical one.

Vocal improvisation can afford singers the opportunity to experience music before they have to label, read, or notate it. This concept of “sound before sight” is central to the influential music pedagogies of Heinrich Pestalozzi and Lowell Mason carried forward today in many choral sight-singing methods.³¹ In his influential text on the pedagogy of improvisation, Edwin Gordon states, “To be taught content before being exposed to the foundation that context provides introduces many debilitating problems that seriously impede learning music, particularly learning to improvise.”³² But, what about our time-honored desire to teach singers to

read music, thereby gaining access to other styles of music formalized through notation? Could success in improvisation subsequently lead to the desire to preserve a musical idea created in a moment of spontaneous improvisation? In these instances, improvisation might generate an intrinsic task-specific motivation to learn about musical notation.

What pedagogical and motivational benefits might improvisation provide that could attract people with limited vocal experience to choral ensembles? Improvisation permits singers to make music without concern for the range or tessitura of a printed vocal line. This characteristic of improvisation can be especially beneficial when standard

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choral voice-part ranges are inappropriate or intimidating. Such instances might occur when, for example, young adolescents experience voice change, singers recover from a vocal injury, or when an adult takes the first tentative steps toward singing in a choral ensemble.³³ For instance, in her analysis of African folk music, Patricia Trice observed, "Singers possessing different ranges and vocal timbres, simultaneously improvising and creating, veered away from unison singing to produce music having two or more different musical parts or melodies. Textures that were sometimes heterophonic, sometimes homophonic, resulted."³⁴ In these instances, improvisation might permit music to meld

with the needs of individual singers rather than requiring singers' conformity to predetermined musical parameters.

Finally, how does this relate to the choral jazz literature available from the large publishers of music for schools and universities? Why does this music, which sounds so exciting and contains multiple opportunities for vocal improvisation, fail to engage students' imaginations and provoke musical effort? Returning to an earlier point, choral conductors might ask themselves about the musical backgrounds and affinities of their students before beginning improvisatory experiences. The improvisational fluency demonstrated in experienced choirs (and vocalists) depends

upon an awareness steeped within idiomatic musical context. Even the harmonic, durational, and stylistic structures of vocal jazz improvisation can prove intimidating to some singers. In a recent study of high school choral programs, June Countryman noted that students reported higher levels of initial confidence when improvising in "vocal jams" than within the parameters of vocal jazz idioms.³⁵ Regardless of the improvisational genre, people define their musical identities by asking "What am I good at?"³⁶ Numerous studies indicate that self-perceptions of ability are key determinants of domain-specific self-esteem³⁷ and subsequent long-term perseverance in music.³⁸

Challenges Posed by Ensemble Instruction in Improvisation

In addition to the direct musical benefits afforded by instruction in vocal improvisation, some researchers believe that improvisation contains the ingredients necessary to foster continued pursuit of musical involvement. Pamela Burnard's work suggests that improvisation promotes students' autonomy as learners and performers, their ownership of their work, and their ability to transfer musical skills to a variety of contexts.³⁹ Given these benefits, why would any choral conductor hesitate to adopt improvisation pedagogy? How can these hesitations be addressed?

One possible obstacle is the typical view of the conductor as the authoritarian taskmaster, a model that is threatened by the collaboration between conductor and singers that improvisation requires. The inherent tension between singer autonomy and conductor authority is resolved differently in a more collaborative model, where the boundary between the two may even be blurred. Here, the adroitness of the ensemble as a whole is sometimes of secondary importance to or achieved as a result of a primary focus on the learning outcomes of individual students. Conductors will be more comfortable with collaboration's tradeoffs who are less motivated by attaining a perfect performance end-product than by practicing a pedagogy that fosters the skills and the

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empowerment of the singers as individuals. Naturally, then, it will be those conductors who have already relaxed their dependence on the authoritarian model who are better predisposed to exploring the incorporation of improvisation into their programs.⁴⁰

This focus on the training and empowerment of individuals is indispensable in improvisation pedagogy which Panagiotis Kanellopoulos describes as "doing music with children, instead of doing music to children."⁴¹ But the practical demands of the individualized approach may seem daunting even to the believer. Gordon reminds us that providing "the same guidance for all students in a group is not the best procedure;"⁴² said procedure is typically, however, the one with which conductors are most familiar. Instead, conductors must learn to offer what Gordon calls "appropriate guidance, guidance that emphasizes learning rather than teaching with special attention given to individual differences personified by the unique levels of musical aptitudes each person possesses."⁴³ The conductor must assess each individual's readiness to participate in a group improvisation, tailoring each experience accordingly. As demanding as structuring these individual experiences may seem, Gordon affirms the generalized value of the pedagogy by these conclusions: given appropriate guidance, all human beings are "capable of improvising to some extent,"⁴⁴ and all students within the group "learn a great deal" from observing one another's individual contributions.⁴⁵ Remaining qualms about the practicality of pursuing individualized improvisation pedagogy may include the challenge of fitting it into a schedule already crammed with so many demands. Many conductors will also recognize the lack of strong models of such a pedagogy in their own backgrounds. How, then or where do we begin?

Where improvisation is to be incorporated within the choral rehearsal, whether because of its potential benefits (musical or extra-musical) or because of improvisatory technique embedded within a particular repertoire selection, choral conductors may find that the warm-up portion of rehearsal provides an opportunity for the most seamless integration of improvisation pedagogy.⁴⁶

Calibrating Individual and Ensemble Needs Within the Choral Warm-Up

Though tradition suggests that choral warm-up activities should be performed in unison by the ensemble, conductors can find opportunities to set parameters within which singers enjoy varying degrees of choice, experimentation, and improvisational opportunity. The choral warm-up process serves to transition singers from their vocal use outside the choral setting to the more deliberate vocal coordination necessary for sustained choral singing. The specific activities within choral warm-up sessions must vary greatly when viewed as preparation for their subsequent rehearsals, but they should sequentially draw the singer's attention to the basic vocal techniques of relaxation, physical alignment, exhalation and inhalation, phonation, and vocalization.

The warm-up stages of phonation and vocalization present logical moments for the introduction of improvisatory activities in which the conductor may establish a harmonic and durational context rather than prescribing exact pitches and rhythms to be sung. For example, the key of A-flat major might be chosen, a durational length of four measures might be established, and then singers might be asked to vocalize on syllables of their choosing (e.g., solfege, numbers, neutral syllables) for four measures within the key of A-flat major.⁴⁶

Improvisatory choral experiences, especially those included in the warm-up, can be informed by the central elements of play. Playful activities are too often dismissed as merely childish, but they offer the benefit of simultaneous enjoyment and learning. Improvisation may appear to be play, without rules and restrictions. When so, it should be seen as affirmation of the conductor's skill in designing and introducing the activity. Writing in the late eighteenth century, Friedrich Schiller observed, "man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays."⁴⁷ How might conductors create opportunities for improvisatory play that offer both degrees of artistic freedom and sufficient structure to ensure that the musical results achieve the desired ends? A



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balance of freedom and structure can allow for improvisational activity that is a concurrent rehearsal of specific musical skills. In this sense, Sennett refers to improvisatory play as "a school for learning to increase complexity."⁴⁸ Patrice Madura adds that, with regard to vocal improvisation and play,

As aspects of a musical style become internalized and automatic, the student can be guided to manipulate those in improvisation. A balance must be achieved between learning the rules of that style (convergent thinking) and having numerous opportunities to "play" with those ideas by varying, combining, and

developing them; synthesizing them into something new.⁴⁹

Various theorists and researchers have suggested paradigms for improvisation pedagogy, and these offer insights as to how conductors might begin to offer musical choice within the warm-up procedure. These paradigms represent two broad viewpoints. The first suggests that improvisation can be taught in developmentally appropriate ways to anyone regardless of age or previous experience.⁵⁰ The second holds that improvisational skills develop in fixed stages relating to cognitive and physical development.⁵¹ As a matter of practice, choral conductors can infer from these two positions that degrees of improvisational freedom can be presented to choral ensembles insofar as there is a gradual transition to improvisatory experiences through the employment of familiar terminologies and musical skills already possessed by the singers.

For instance, composer Michael DeLalla suggests that classically-trained musicians can approach improvisation in four phases: first by sensing opportunity to interact within an ongoing musical event (such as singing a vocalise), enacting the sensed opportunity (singing a different phrase that seems to fit with the vocalise), noticing the result of the enactment, and, finally, reforming the musical idea to better fit the musical context.⁵² Labeling or analyzing the ways in which the singer improvised can wait until a later, opportune moment. What is important is that the singer develop a sense of empowerment to interact with music in ways that are both predictable, because of the context, and spontaneous, because of the element of personal choice. Providing durational and/or harmonic context is an important element toward ensuring that the improvised material doesn't approach, in Sennett's words, "the equivalent of a visual maze."⁵³ These improvised musical experiences, no matter how tentative, are the beginnings of a choral pedagogy that is differentiated to meet the needs of individual singers yet defined enough to ensure progress toward the needs of repertoire and ensemble singing.

First Steps Toward Improvisational Experimentation

DeLalla's four phases (sensing, enacting, noticing, reforming) parallel the four dimensions that Raymond Tallis describes in his examination of the human hand and how it functions.⁵⁴ Tallis explores the concept of prehension, in which the hand automatically takes the shape of an object prior to grasping it. Tallis deconstructs this seemingly simple act into a sequence of anticipating, contacting, thinking, and doing.⁵⁵ In improvisation, the singer must first gather information about the underlying musical material (anticipating), interact by contributing a musical idea (contacting), apprehend what has been done and its effect (thinking), and reflect that information within the ongoing improvisation (doing). Where prehension chiefly refers to a physical act, comprehension refers to its mental equivalent, and their interrelatedness is of value to the process of making music. Thinking about music moves the unconscious to the conscious, and the doing of music (improvising, in this case) moves the conscious to the purposeful.⁵⁶

Both DeLalla and Tallis offer sequences for learning that move from abstract to concrete conceptions, draw upon heightened awareness, and result in comprehension based upon experiential data. Our choral warm-ups are already configured in much the same way, designed to apply generalized or abstract concepts of singing to the realities of choral literature. Teaching toward improvisation within the warm-up structure can follow the same approach.

Several examples of beginning improvisatory warm-up experiences are presented sequentially here, not as prescriptions, but as illustrations of the principles described above. As always, such activities will be successful only when matched to the skill and experience levels of the singers who will perform them. These activities might be introduced as games for younger choirs, and they are equally effective for more experienced ensembles when described in ways that reflect their maturity.

In preparation, conductors might consider limiting the palette of musical options, with the intent of focusing singers' attention



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on how to improvise rather than on the vast array of choices that might be possible. One way to accomplish this would be to create pictorial, non-standard notational images of the musical principles suggested by Kaschub and Smith (sound/silence, motion/stasis, unity/variety, tension/release, and stability/instability), or analytical musical descriptors such as “long tones,” “short tones,” “*staccato*,” “*crescendo*,” “high pitches.” These images might be posted on the wall in front of the choir, with singers choosing from them as they decide on the musical characteristic(s) of their improvisatory exercise. Composer Michael Colgrass refers to these types of images as “graphics” in his work with teaching improvisation to band students.⁵⁷ Conductors can easily limit or expand options as necessary by adding and deleting graphics.

I. Sensing (Anticipating) The conductor presents an ostinato pattern by having a group of choristers sing it, or having it produced electronically. The conductor selects two of the graphics on the wall (e.g., long tones and stepwise) and models the singing of sustained pitches that change only by step to reflect the harmonic context established by the *ostinato*. The *ostinato* continues as the conductor stops and asks choir members to sing the vocalized model “inside your heads, with no sound coming out.” The conductor points to a third graphic (e.g. *crescendo*) and asks students to add that characteristic to the sound in their heads. After a time of silent singing (what Gordon calls “audiation”),⁵⁸ the conductor asks all students to sing, either reflecting the two graphics originally presented or with the addition of the third graphic. As the exercise continues, the conductor encourages students to change their choice of graphics as they sense opportunities within the unfolding musical exercise.

II. Enacting (Contacting) In another exercise, the conductor leads singers through a vocalise but raises a hand at an

unexpected moment as indication that singers are to “find the ending.” Singers have to determine how to get from whatever musical material they are currently producing to an endpoint that sounds musically complete.

III. Noticing (Thinking) Following the previous exercises, singers are asked to identify the graphics they relied on most prominently to help them “find the ending.” Depending on the context, the discussion might include theoretical material such as cadences, suspensions, resolutions, voice leading, etc.

IV. Reforming (Doing) Using a predetermined musical phrase or set of phrases drawn from the choir’s repertory, choristers vary musical characteristics of those phrases. For instance, the choir might begin by sustaining the first pitch of the phrase. At the con-

ductor’s signal, the singers sing the predetermined phrase but vary an aspect of the phrase (keep the same pitches but vary rhythm; keep rhythm but vary pitches; experiment with changes in articulation, dynamics, etc.). This is similar to how a jazz musician uses improvisational motives, riffs, and what Keith Sawyer calls the language of “ready-mades” that provides improvisers the base material from which they create musical variations.⁵⁹ Further instructions from the conductor may lead singers to incorporate specific intervals, melodic patterns that extend through the range, rhythm patterns, or text passages.

With careful planning, a conductor may be able to incorporate within the warm-up sequence some improvisatory exercises that preemptively ameliorate many of the problem areas to be focused on within the impending rehearsal of repertoire. With

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each of these activities, conductors can create opportunities for the elaboration of singers' own knowledge and skills, providing a sort of experiential vocabulary from which they can draw when they next improvise. Describing this type of improvisation pedagogy, Gordon wrote,

Just as a vocabulary of words, not thinking, can be taught, all a teacher can do is provide students with the necessary readiness to teach themselves how to improvise. That readiness consists of acquiring a vocabulary of tonal patterns, rhythm patterns, melodic patterns (the combining of tonal and rhythm patterns), and harmonic patterns as they relate to temporal aspects in music.⁶⁰

Coda

The inclusion of improvisatory experiences within the choral ensemble experience is different from distributing a jazz chart or copying a recorded performance of vocal improvisation. Choral conductors can guide singers toward a sequence of improvisatory experiences that proceed from abstract to concrete conceptions, draw upon heightened awareness, and result in comprehension based upon the experience of making music both individually, collectively with fellow singers, and in collaboration with their conductor. In this way, choral conductors can approach improvisation within the structures and traditions of the worldwide choral arts and beyond the limitations of traditional, conductor-centered approaches that have come to dominate the profession.

One brief comment by composer John Cage encapsulates the tensions and potential resolutions raised by the consideration of improvisation within the choral experience. Cage cautioned against applying strict value judgments to music that is inherently malleable and interpretive, saying that such judgments "are destructive to our proper business, which is curiosity and awareness."⁶¹ It may be that the incorporation of impro-

visation within the choral rehearsal setting will provoke curiosity and awareness of musical skills and understandings otherwise unexplored by many of our current and future singers.

This article is based on a truncated version of this paper presented at The Eighth International Symposium on the Philosophy of Music Education (June 10, 2010; Helsinki, Finland)

NOTES

- ¹ See Susan J. Byo, "Classroom Teachers' and Music Specialists' Perceived Ability to Implement the National Standards for Music Education," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 47, no. 2 (1999): 111–23; Patrice Madura Ward-Steinman, "Confidence in Teaching Improvisation According to the K-12 Achievement Standards: Surveys of Vocal Jazz Workshop Participants and Undergraduates," *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* 172 (2007): 25–40; and Julie K. Scott, "Me? Teach Improvisation to Children?," *General Music Today* 20, no. 2 (2007): 6–13.
- ² See Katherine Strand, "Survey of Indiana Music Teachers on Using Composition in the Classroom," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 54, no. 2 (2006): 154–67.
- ³ Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008): acknowledgments.
- ⁴ See Nina Gilbert, "Singing and the Self: Choral Music as 'Active Leisure,'" *Choral Journal* 35, no. 7 (1995): 13–20; See also Thomas Turino, "Formulas and Improvisation in Participatory Music" in *Musical Improvisation: Art, Education, and Society*, ed. Gabriel Solis and Bruno Nettl (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009): 103–16.
- ⁵ George E. Lewis, "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives," *Black Music Research Journal* 22, Supplement: Best of BMRJ (2002): 234; Christopher Small, *Music of the Common Tongue: Survival and Celebration in African American Music* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998): 308.

⁶ For example, see Patricia Johnson Trice, *Choral Arrangements of the African-American Spirituals: Historical Overview and Annotated Listings* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press): 7–8, 28.

⁷ David K. Lines, "Improvisation and Cultural Work in Music and Music Education" in *Music Education for the New Millennium: Theory and Practice Futures for Music Teaching and Learning*, ed. David K. Lines (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005): 67; See also Lee Higgins and Patricia Shehan Campbell, *Free to Be Musical: Group Improvisation in Music* (Reston, VA: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2010).

⁸ For example, see Joseph Shively, "In the Face of Tradition: Questioning the Roles of Conductors and Ensemble Members in School Bands, Choirs, and Orchestras" in *Questioning the Music Education Paradigm*, ed. Lee R. Bartel (Waterloo, ON Canada: Canadian Music Educators' Association, 2004), 179–90; See also Barry Barnes, *Understanding Agency: Social Theory and Responsible Action* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000).

⁹ See Patrick K. Freer, "Beyond Error Detection: A Cycle of Pedagogical Skills for Choral Conductors," *Choral Journal* 50, no. 3 (2009): 34–45.

¹⁰ See Carl Dalhaus, *Schoenberg and the New Music: Essays*, trans. Derrick Puffett and Alfred Clayton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987): 269–70; Lines, "Improvisation," 65.

¹¹ Consortium of National Arts Education Associations, *National Standards for Arts Education: What Every Young American Should Know and Be Able to Do in the Arts* (Reston, VA: MENC, 1994).

¹² Quoted in Edward Robbins, *Why Architects Draw* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997): 126.

¹³ Patrice Madura Ward-Steinman, "Arts Praxis: A Model for Teaching Creative Vocal Jazz Improvisation," Available: http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/music/artspraxis/vocal_jazz_improvisation (July 25, 2009).

¹⁴ See Sennett, *Craftsman*, 52.

¹⁵ See Madura Ward-Steinman, "Confidence in Teaching Improvisation."

¹⁶ Sennett, *Craftsman*, 184.

¹⁷ For other suggestions, see Paul Berliner, "Arranging Pieces: Decisions in Rehearsal" in *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*

- (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994): 289–313.
- ¹⁸ Christopher Azzara, "Improvisation," in *The New Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning*, ed. Richard Colwell and Carol Richardson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002): 171.
- ¹⁹ Dalhaus, *Schoenberg*, 268.
- ²⁰ Lucy Green, "Response to Panel," 2008. Available: <http://www-usr.rider.edu/~vrme/v12n1/vision/Green%20Response.pdf> (July 25, 2009).
- ²¹ Azzara, "Improvisation," 172.
- ²² Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1993): 142.
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- ²⁵ John Blacking, *Music, Culture and Experience: Selected Papers of John Blacking*, ed. Reginald Byron (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995): 230.
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- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ Lines, "Improvisation and Cultural Work," 66.
- ³¹ See Steven M. Demorest, *Building Choral Excellence: Teaching Sight-Singing in the Choral Rehearsal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
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- ³³ Patrick K. Freer, "Between Research and Practice: How Choral Music Loses Boys in the 'Middle,'" *Music Educators Journal* 94, no. 2 (2007): 28–34.
- ³⁴ Trice, *Choral Arrangements*, 3.
- ³⁵ June Countryman, "High School Music Programmes as Potential Sites for Communities of Practice—a Canadian Study," *Music Education Research* 11, no. 1 (2009): 101.
- ³⁶ James E. Maddux and Jennifer T. Gosselin, "Self-efficacy," in *Handbook of Self and Identity*, ed. Mark R. Leary & June Price Tangney (New York: Guilford Press, 2003): 218.
- ³⁷ Patrick K. Freer, "Two Decades of Research on Possible Selves and the 'Missing Males' Problem in Choral Music," *International Journal of Music Education: Research* 28, no. 1 (2010): 17–30; Raymond R. MacDonald, David Hargreaves, and Dorothy Miell (Eds.), *Musical Identities* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2002).
- ³⁸ Susan Hallam and Vanessa Prince, "Conceptions of Musical Ability," *Research Studies in Music Education* 20 (2003): 2–22; Susan A. O'Neill, "The Self-Identity of Young Musicians," in *Musical Identities*, ed. Raymond R. MacDonald, David Hargreaves, and Dorothy Miell (New York: Oxford University Press): 79–96.
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- ⁴¹ Gordon, *Improvisation*, 2.
- ⁴² Freer, "Cycle.," Liz Garnett, *Choral Conducting and the Construction of Meaning: Gesture, Voice, Identity* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2009); Colin Durrant, *Choral Conducting: Philosophy and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
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- ⁴⁴ Gordon, *Improvisation*, 93–94
- ⁴⁵ Patrick K. Freer, "Choral Warm-Ups for Changing Adolescent Voices," *Music Educators Journal* 95, no. 3 (2009): 55–60; see also Cindy L. Bell, "Harmonizing and Improvising in the Choral Rehearsal: A Sequential Approach," *Music Educators Journal* 90, no. 4 (2004): 31–36.
- ⁴⁶ For more detailed examples see Freer, "Choral Warm-Ups."
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- ⁵⁰ Burnard, "Investigating Children's Meaning-Making"; Madura Ward-Steinman, "Arts Praxis."
- ⁵¹ John Kratus, "A Developmental Approach to Teaching Music Improvisation," *International Journal of Music Education* 26, no. 1 (1995): 27–38; John Kratus, "Growing with Improvisation," *Music Educators Journal* 78, no. 4 (1991): 36–40.
- ⁵² Michael DeLalla, "Teaching Improvisation to Classical Music Students," Presentation for the International Society for Improvised Music (Denver, CO), December 6, 2008.
- ⁵³ Sennett, *Craftsman*, 237.
- ⁵⁴ Raymond Tallis, *The Hand: A Philosophical Inquiry into Human Being* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003).
- ⁵⁵ These steps are my distillation of Tallis' nuanced account; he does not identify these four steps explicitly. Material on the following pages prompted my terminology: anticipating (p. 49), contacting (pp. 55 and 278), thinking (pp. 62, 63, and 69), doing (p. 69).
- ⁵⁶ Patricia Shehan Campbell, "Learning to Improvise Music, Improvising to Learn Music" in *Musical Improvisation: Art, Education, and Society*, ed. Gabriel Solis and Bruno Nettl (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009): 119–42.
- ⁵⁷ Michael Colgrass, "Composers and Children: A Future Creative Force?," *Music Educators Journal* 91, no. 1 (2004): 19–23.
- ⁵⁸ Gordon, *Improvisation*; Gordon provides the following definition for "audiation" on page 120: "Hearing and comprehending in one's mind the sound of music that is not or may never have been physically present. It is neither imitation nor memorization. There are six stages of audiation and eight types of audiation."
- ⁵⁹ Lewis, "Improvised Music," 231–34; R. Keith Sawyer, "Improvisation and the Creative Process: Dewey, Collingwood, and the Aesthetics of Spontaneity," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58, no. 2 (2000), 157.
- ⁶⁰ Gordon, *Improvisation*, 12.
- ⁶¹ John Cage, "Conversation with Richard Kostelanetz (1968)," in *John Cage*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (London: Allen Lane, 1971): 27–28.

