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Source: *Music Educators Journal*, Vol. 83, No. 1 (Jul., 1996), pp. 17-21+47

Published by: MENC: The National Association for Music Education

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3398989>

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# TO SING OR NOT TO SING IN INSTRUMENTAL CLASS

*Introducing vocalization techniques at the beginning of band or orchestra rehearsals can improve musical and critical-thinking skills of young performers.*

BY MITCHELL ROBINSON

Singing has long been an accepted component of the college or university undergraduate music curriculum, where it is used to help students develop aural skills, learn sight-reading, and make connections between the basic elements of music theory and the practical application of these elements. Most music educators would agree that singing is an activity critical to the development of musical understanding and aesthetic sensitivity. Why is it, then, that many band and orchestra directors at the elementary, middle, and high school levels are reluctant to incorporate vocalization activities into their instrumental instructional programs?

## Conserving Time

Instrumental ensemble directors commonly express three reasons for their reluctance to include singing in the rehearsal process. The first is a fear of wasting time on nonperformance-oriented objectives. While it is true that the inclusion of vocalization activities requires additional time, the skills developed through the regular

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.....

practice of these activities help students become independent learners, who are able to fix their own musical problems quickly and efficiently. For example, it is likely that the student who continually misses the new flat in the trio of a march is not hearing the note in the context of the new tonal center created through the transposition at the trio section. The student who is able to sing the notes and hear the problem can fix it without assistance, leading to fewer interruptions and a more efficient use of rehearsal time.

Another area in which singing can actually help conserve rehearsal time is tuning. Many directors mistakenly believe that the act of matching a sin-

gle pitch at the beginning of each rehearsal will automatically make the students tune more accurately. They devote large amounts of time to complex methods designed to achieve this goal. Often, these methods include relying on an electronic strobe tuner, a device that few students have at home for additional practice. The ritual of students forming lines and marching in front of a machine does little to foster a student-centered approach to tuning in which performers take responsibility for their own intonation.

As accomplished musicians know, good intonation depends on the ability to adjust one's own pitch to both the function of that pitch within a harmonic context and the pitches of other members of the ensemble. Structured singing furthers the development of a consistent sense of tonality, which can help free the director from "the frustrating task of repeatedly telling his students what should be obvious, i.e., that there are pitch inaccuracies that must be corrected."<sup>1</sup> A tuning approach that involves the singing and playing of functional musical patterns (tonic and dominant) can help students become aware of pitch discrepancies as they arise. It will also result in better intonation at both the individual and the ensemble levels, not to mention a significant savings in rehearsal time spent on tuning.

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## Modeling

A second reason often given by orchestra and band directors for not using singing activities is a lack of confidence in their own ability to sing. Many instrumentalists have not sung in front of others since their college training, and some teachers' previous vocal or choral experiences may have been unpleasant or unsatisfactory. While it is true that effective vocal modeling in terms of both accuracy and tone quality is important, the director who is willing to "accept his own inevitable errors ... establish[es] an environment in which students are also free to make mistakes."<sup>2</sup> This type of open classroom atmosphere is conducive not only to singing, but also to the kind of risk-taking so necessary for student growth.

For those teachers whose reluctance to sing in front of their students is deeply ingrained, instrumental modeling can provide an intermediate step in the process. Using one's major instrument to lead simple echo games as part of a five-minute warm-up can provide students with an accurate model of musical patterns. It can also help a teacher gain confidence about performing for students. Making the move to singing becomes a natural extension of this process.

## Positive Reactions

The third reason for the lack of vocalization in many school instrumental programs is a fear that students will respond negatively to singing. Although students (especially older students) may initially appear reluctant to sing, this behavior may stem more from shyness or peer pressure than any real dislike for the activity itself. Much like their teachers, students need to be introduced to vocalization gently and painlessly in a positive, unthreatening atmosphere. If the director demonstrates appropriate vocal modeling with comfort and security, the students will, given time, follow the teacher's lead and respond in kind.

Some instrumentalists, particularly boys, feel uncomfortable about being *seen* singing, not about the act of singing. For these students, an effective technique is to precede actual

singing with closed-mouth humming, an activity usually perceived by them as less threatening. Once the students feel comfortable while humming, the transition to open-mouth singing usually comes quickly and without further difficulty. Other types of vocalization activities that can be useful in encouraging reluctant singers include chanting, rapping, and vocal effects (whistling, siren sounds, and so forth).

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## Benefits

Studies of the relationship between vocalization and instrumental instruction and performance have examined the effects of singing on instrumental music students at various age levels and abilities, from preschool all the way to the college and university level.<sup>3</sup> Singing as an instrumental music instructional technique has also been researched in terms of its curricular implications and its use as a tool for conductor/teacher effectiveness.<sup>4</sup> The studies show that vocalization techniques can have a significant effect on instrumental performance and instruction. Students exposed to singing as a regular component of their instructional program tend to score higher on measures of music achievement, executive skill development (fingering, articulation, bowing, and so forth), attitude, and developmental music aptitude.<sup>5</sup> A positive

correlation has also been found between bands receiving superior sight-reading ratings and the inclusion of vocalization activities in the teaching/learning process.<sup>6</sup>

It has also been concluded that although vocalization is not frequently employed in band rehearsals, effectiveness ratings for singing activities are consistently higher than corresponding frequency ratings, with "play-sing-play" concepts cited as the most frequently employed vocalization techniques.<sup>7</sup> The results of these studies suggest that instrumental directors and their students would benefit from the inclusion of vocalization strategies in the rehearsal, with the potential advantages of more accurate intonation, superior instrumental skills, increased sight-reading ability, and improved attitude.

## Registers and Ranges

The reluctance that teachers show for vocalization activities may have to do with a lack of knowledge regarding the nature of the voice and the choice of appropriate vocal ranges for student singing. According to Betty Bertaux, "The terms 'register' and 'range' have been mistakenly used interchangeably. 'Range' refers to the number of tones between the lowest and highest notes that a person can sing and 'register' has to do with timbre and sensation, and it involves muscular action that affects the vocal folds."<sup>8</sup> In general, the vocal mechanism can be thought of as consisting of two qualitative registers. The modal register (or chest voice) is used primarily in speech and is characterized by a heavy, reedy, or coarse timbre. Prolonged, consistent use of the modal register for singing can result in vocal damage and the development of vocal nodules. The loft register (or head voice) is used primarily in singing and is characterized by a light, thin, or sweet timbre.

Both registers have a physiological pitch-range limit. The modal register has a recommended pitch range from middle C to A, while the loft register spans from A to E, with overlapping, or blending, from approximately F to C (see figure 1). For inexperienced singers, songs and tonal patterns of a limited range (a fourth to a sixth) are

recommended, and it is suggested that the music be set either entirely above the register break (in the keys of G or A) or entirely below the register break (in the keys of C or D). Band directors accustomed to working in the keys of B-flat and E-flat may wish to transpose passages from band compositions in these keys to more “singer friendly” keys.

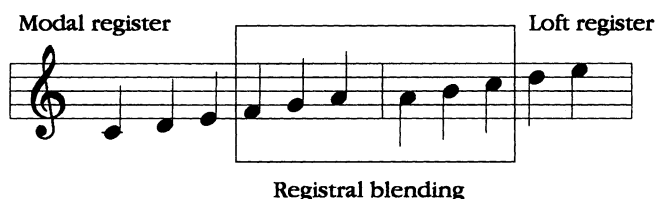
### Suggested Activities

One way to acclimate students to vocalization activities is to introduce the activities gradually, perhaps using a song from a composition that the group is already studying. For example, the English folk song “Ayre for Eventide” serves as the basis of the second movement of Hugh M. Stuart’s middle-level band work *Three Ayres from Glouster* (see figure 2 for melody). This work is suitable for study and performance by both junior high and high school ensembles.

To begin, introduce the melody as a rote song (without notation). The tune breaks naturally into four phrases and can be taught by singing each phrase on a neutral syllable and then asking the students to echo the phrase back. When introducing tonal patterns, you are engaging students in an activity at the “aural/oral” level of learning; therefore, no tonal syllables (such as *do, re, mi*) should be used.<sup>9</sup> The neutral syllable “bum” works well for activities at this learning level. Whenever you are using patterns in an echo-game activity, it is important to sing as expressively as possible; attempt to draw the students into a musical conversation. If students are hesitant, ask them to hum the patterns first and then gradually move to open-mouth singing.

At this point in the process, referred to as the “teaching mode,” you should feel free to sing along with the students as they echo. Later, in the “evaluation mode,” you may want to remain silent while the students sing in order to assess individual student performances. For best results, teach the students to sing the song before they play the song. If the range of the song is awkward for you or your students, transpose the melody up or down until it is comfortable for the voice.

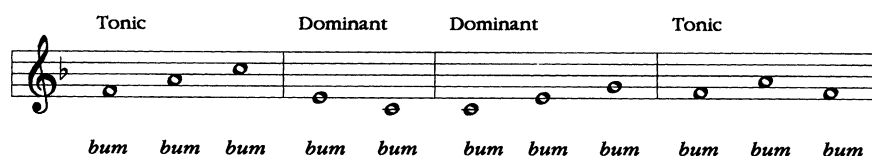
**Figure 1. Vocal registers and recommended ranges**



**Figure 2. English folk song “Ayre for Eventide”**



**Figure 3. Neutral syllables for patterns for “Ayre for Eventide”**



As students become familiar with the song, you can begin to extract patterns from the melody to use in more echo-game activities. These patterns should be no longer than two or three notes to start with and should represent tonic and dominant harmonic functions. Figure 3 shows a set of patterns

that can be extracted from the “Ayre for Eventide.”

As the students become more comfortable with echoing patterns, begin to introduce the appropriate “verbal associations” to the patterns.<sup>10</sup> Using the appropriate tonal syllables for the patterns will serve to reinforce the

It is important to remember that no more than five minutes per

learning, based on audiation) at the beginning of each rehearsal is a good way to focus student attention in a musical manner.<sup>11</sup> It also works well as an element of a longer warm-up routine that includes scales, chorales, and rhythm exercises.

Tonic                      Dominant                      Dominant                      Tonic

*do mi sol ti sol sol ti re do mi do*

Part 1

Part 2

The image shows two staves of music. The top staff is labeled 'Part 1' and the bottom staff is labeled 'Part 2'. Both staves are in 3/4 time and have a key signature of one flat (B-flat). Part 1 starts with a quarter rest, followed by a quarter note G4, an eighth note A4, and a quarter note B4. Part 2 starts with a whole rest, followed by a quarter note G4, an eighth note A4, and a quarter note B4. The music ends with a double bar line and the word 'etc.' written below the final note of Part 1.

Songs such as “Ayre for Eventide” can also be used as an introduction to composition and creative musical thinking. For example, after students can sing the song accurately, ask one or more students to come up with a countermelody that sounds good with the melody. You may want to “set the stage for success” by first teaching a simple bass line accompaniment to the melody (see figure 5). Have the students work in small groups, and then ask them to perform (instrumentally and vocally) their two-part inventions. This kind of activity is great for teaching concepts such as transposition (“Why can’t a French horn and a clarinet play the same notes?”), balance (“How come the trombone is always louder than the flute?”), and range (“Why can’t the saxophone play a low A-flat?”).

## Critical-Thinking Skills

Another way to use singing activities to teach general music concepts is to have students sing a familiar song in different tonalities and meters. For example, once students know “Ayre for Eventide,” you can tell them that the song is in a major key. Minor tonality can then be taught by having students sing the song in the minor key and asking them to identify the

differences between major and minor. Children learn by comparing various concepts and observing how they are the same or different.

This sequence of activities can conclude by having students play the second movement of Hugh M. Stuart's *Three Ayres from Gloucester* (Shawnee Press, 1969) and then asking them a series of questions about the music:

- How many of you played the melody during the movement?
- Who played a countermelody or bass line?
- How many times was the melody repeated in the movement?
- Was the melody always in the same key?
- Was the melody ever played with different accompaniments?
- Were different versions of the melody played in the movement?

Students who are able to answer these types of questions are engaged in a deeper form of musical understanding than those who merely play the right pitches at the right time. They are exhibiting critical-thinking skills, long-term musical memory, and problem-solving abilities in a musical environment. As teachers, parents, and administrators look for ways to improve the educational process, music teachers who include more than notes and rhythms in their curricular approach will find themselves on the cutting edge of music education.

## Summary

Imagine an ensemble that plays in tune naturally and effortlessly, with minimal rehearsal time spent on "down-the-line" intonation checks. Imagine a room full of students able to tune their own instruments quickly and easily without the assistance of a teacher and without having to march past flickering electronic tuners. Imagine spending the majority of each rehearsal working on issues of phrasing, expression, and sensitivity, rather than endless hours of drills and repetition. These imagined scenarios are within the realm of possibility.

Consider the advantages of including singing activities in the instrumental rehearsal: improved sight-reading, fewer intonation problems, superior instrumental skills, and more efficient

rehearsals. Instrumental teachers who are able to overcome their reluctance to incorporate singing activities in the rehearsal setting provide their students with more efficient and enjoyable music learning experiences. In so doing, they will help to train a generation of musically active and musically literate adults.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

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■ ■ ■ ■ ■

## Notes

1. Darrell L. Walters and Cynthia C. Taggart, eds., *Readings in Music Learning Theory* (Chicago: G.I.A. Publications, Inc., 1989), 223.

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5. For studies related to vocalization techniques as an effect on music achievement, see Dunlap, "The Effects of Singing and Solmization Training," and McDonald, "The Application of Edwin Gordon's Empirical Model."

For studies related to vocalization techniques as an effect on executive skill development, see Gamble, "A Study of the Effects of Two Types of Tonal Pattern Instruction," and McDonald, "The Application of Edwin Gordon's Empirical Model."

For studies related to vocalization techniques as an effect on attitude, see Davis, "The Effects of Structured Singing Activities."

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6. Harris, "Comparisons of Attained Ratings to Instructional Behaviors."

7. Schlacks, "The Effect of Vocalization through an Interval Training Program."

8. Walters and Taggart, *Readings in Music Learning*, 94.

9. Gordon, *Learning Sequences in Music*, 23-32.

10. Ibid., 32-37.

11. Ibid., 200. ■

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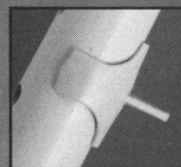
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