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SOUTHWESTERN DIVISION

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Conventions Consolidate Opportunities to Listen and Learn

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The 2006 Southwest ACDA convention in St. Louis exceeded all my expectations. I have always held the notion that if a professional convention rewarded me with one new, important musical insight, the effort and expense were worth it. The rewards of this convention were many: the choirs, the conductors, the presenters, and the overall design were top level. If you were able to attend the convention, you know what I mean. If you were unable to attend, you missed a special opportunity to listen and learn.

Cultivating one's ideal choral tone is a primary interest for every successful conductor. This convention provided the attentive listener with an incredibly rich and varied tone pallet to consider. Consolidating so many fine choirs into three days offered the listener multiple opportunities to hear and compare. While experienced conductors are continually working to refine their choral tone tastes, young choral conductors are just beginning the process of internalizing the various possibilities for tone production and the means by which to achieve their ideal tone. Although tone is comprised of a variety of interlocking continuums, consider for a moment two specific elements inherent in choral tone, the effect of tall vowels and the effect of forward resonant-mask-ring.

There is an intimate relationship between a singer's tone and a singer's vowels. Standard choral practice associates appropriate tone with tall vowels. Tall vowels are connected to a relaxed larynx and a lifted soft pallet. To access the required lift and space, many conductors use the (oo) vowel. Although young singers can easily access the lifted (oo) vowel, transferring and maintaining that lift to the other vowels is a much bigger challenge. Have you developed your ability to hear the difference between the lifted, tall vowel and a vowel sound produced with a collapsed soft pallet? Have you developed your own pedagogical approach to develop tall vowels? Did you know that the (ah) vowel may be the most difficult vowel to maintain in a lifted position? Should you teach for tall vowels to all singers, pre-teen through adult? Are there vocal concerns when using the (oo) vowel as the primary means to teach for the lifted soft pallet? Have you considered choral tone to a level that you can ask meaningful questions?

The forward resonant-mask-ring complements the acoustical properties of the space required in the back of the mouth to create lifted vowels. Singing the (ih) vowel

through the lift created by the (oo) vowel can help singers access the forward resonant-mask-ring. Knowing how to encourage forward resonant-mask-ring and tall vowels without allowing the tone to become pressed or nasal is the conductor's challenge. Can you recognize the sound of appropriate forward resonant-mask-ring when you hear it? Have you considered how you may want to teach it to members of your choir? Can you model it for your students? Should you teach for forward resonant-mask-ring to all singers, pre-teen through adult?

When developing tone, two additional areas to consider are the effect of vibrato and the effect of dynamics on tone quality. Jerry McCoy at the University of North Texas refers to the use of minimal vibrato when nurturing the tone of experienced collegiate choral singers. Have you developed a thoughtful point of view on the use of vibrato in choral music sung by pre-teen singers through adults? Does restricting the use of vibrato affect vocal freedom? Is vocal maturity and vocal vibrato always related? Is the use of vibrato influenced by musical style? How much vibrato is appropriate to any situation? On whose authority do you base your opinions?

Is the dynamics palette affected by the quality of the choral tone or is the quality of the choral tone affected by the dynamics palette? When I first started teaching, the choral adjudicators at my district's large group choral festival indicated that the tone for my middle school girls was a bit too breathy. My ego was wounded and my response was naïve and somewhat hard-headed. I thought, "Of course their tone is a bit too breathy; they're middle school girls." That summer I heard Doreen Rao conduct her Glen Ellen Children's Choir in a workshop performance at the University of Illinois that dramatically changed my thinking. The tone of those thirty young singers was appropriately full and there was enough ring to carry across a symphony orchestra. So we are left with the question, does the desire to have a broad dynamics palette affect the way tone is developed? The wonderful choirs that presented at this year's SWACDA gave every listener the opportunity to listen and to learn.

Because presentation blocks had multiple offerings, it was not possible to attend every speaker presentation, but the presentations I did attend were outstanding. To mention only a few, the remarks by Kent Tritle, conductor of the professional choir from New York City, Ignatius of Loyola; R. Paul Crabb from the University of Missouri, Columbia; and Donald Neuen, from UCLA and guest conductor of the SWACDA Collegiate Choir reminded us of the multiple dimensions embedded in making quality choral music.

No doubt that I am biased, but the Student and Youth Activities Roundtable, "First Year Surprises," appeared to be a success. It was attended by approximately twenty-five pre-service teachers from around the division and a panel consisting of seven young in-service teachers: Amy Parent, Stephen Rew, and Katherine Luh represented Missouri;

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Randall Capshaw, Stephanie Handal, and Josh Oppenheim represented Texas; and Austen Wilson represented Colorado. Many thanks are due to all the panel members and many of the pre-service students who contributed enthusiastically to the discussion. An interesting outcome was that the surprises reported by panel members were not specific to music. Surprises focused on issues that were non-specific to music:

- working with special needs students
- communicating with parents
- learning to value parental support, too much and too little
- completing administrative school paperwork
- realizing how much time is required after school, at night, and on weekends
- realizing the complexities of the effects of negative colleagues while remaining open and supportive

I arrived in St. Louis on Wednesday, March 8. On Saturday, March 11, I departed, suffering from convention fatigue, yet satiated and ready to do it all again. SWACDA President, Dr. Guy Webb; the entire St. Louis convention team; the choirs; the conductors; and the presenters should be commended for making the 2006 St. Louis convention a marked and memorable success.