Middle school boys’ choir. Just hearing the words can strike fear in even the most experienced choir director. But why? Is it because their voices are in so many states of incredible transition? Is it because their bodies are growing so quickly that the fit of their blue jeans suggests they’re preparing for the Great Flood? Or is it because their minds are so awash with hormones that they can’t seem to focus or stand still for longer than two minutes at a time? Maybe it’s just that they smell funny. Of course, the most likely answer is all of the above.

Focus on Tone

Let’s begin with the most basic component of any musical ensemble—tone. Most choir directors can define, recognize, and teach a young treble choir to produce a well-tuned and well-produced choral tone. If you asked ten choir directors what a typical thirteen-year-old female sounds like, the answers would probably be very similar. They might involve terms such as light, flute-like, airy, or breathy, possibly with a developing vibrato and a comfortable singing range of one and one-half or two octaves. (This is certainly not intended to over-simplify the approach to female adolescent voice instruction—a topic deserving of its own focus and article.)

But what would those same ten choir directors say if asked to describe a typical thirteen-year-old male sound? The answers would likely be less consistent. The thirteen-year-old male voice can be as varied as the stars in the sky. It can be fully changed with a troublesome transition into the falsetto or completely unchanged with a tone as pure as a bell. The speaking voice can be quite husky and the singing voice might have a workable range of only five notes—most of which you probably don’t need in the octavo you are preparing. The variety of characteristics goes on and on. Most choir directors understand this reality yet still experience great frustration with the fact that middle school boys’ voices can’t be placed in a single category. It’s simply the boy’s voice conundrum, or what I like to call the BVC.

Work from Where They Are

The solution to the BVC is multifaceted. First, we must meet them where they are! While the male and female adolescent voice challenges are different, that should never change a choir director’s approach. Good singing technique is good singing technique, regardless of gender.

Determine where they can phonate and focus on helping them produce good, resonant tone quality. The speaking voice pitch can offer great guidance to a choir director in this area. Determine the pitch on which they speak and focus there in the beginning. Work the voice up and down from this fixed point to determine range and the limitations that voice may be experiencing. As you exercise the voice, work to enhance the vocal tone through the teaching of good vocal technique, such as keeping the soft palette raised and keeping the upper lip off the front teeth to achieve a forward-placed and resonant tone.

You might be thinking that this all sounds good but that your boys don’t all phonate in the same place, especially at the beginning of the year. This can absolutely be the case, but our goal should be to find the common ground in the choir and then expand on it. At the beginning of their seventh or eighth grade year, most young men can phonate on an A or A-flat below middle C. For those who cannot, individual help from the teacher may be needed to find and expand their range.

Don’t Forget the Falsetto

The second solution to the BVC is to incorporate falsetto singing into every warm-up every day. The upper-treble range is a vital and important aspect of any male voice. Plus, it is in this range where most boys spend at least the first ten years of their
lives singing and speaking. Why should we abandon this most familiar of vocal sounds just as the voice enters a state of flux? Singing in the falsetto promotes flexibility in all ranges and requires the boys to use much greater energy in their singing tone than the “easy” changed voice might require. Start above the transition notes (or break) every day and ease into the changed voice from the upper range. The transition notes for every young adolescent boy will vary and are determined by where the changed voice must switch into the falsetto register. Will it crack? Yes. Might there be some gaps? Absolutely. Could this make boys feel self-conscious? Certainly. So what’s the solution? It can help to approach these challenges as a body-builder would when increasing a weight limit on a bench press. A gap or crack in the voice is the body’s way of identifying where strength needs to be increased. Although the voice may occasionally crack, every young man in the choir should understand that this is simply his body’s way of identifying a weakness and working to overcome that weakness. It is not a flaw of which to be ashamed but merely a sign that he is growing stronger every day.

The vocabulary we use with our young men makes the critical difference in empowering them to take charge of their voice change rather than becoming victims of it.

Understand Their Nature

In addition to the BVC, many choir directors experience great frustration in learning how to work with the inherent persona of the adolescent male. Admittedly, this can be a great challenge, but with a better understanding of this age group’s characteristics, directors can work with instead of against them to help each student, and the choir as a whole, develop.

Maximize Through Movement

The early adolescent male tends to be very active, with the seeming inability to be still for any length of time. They’re fidgety, restless, and sometimes downright wiggly! This presents an obvious challenge to any choir director attempting to teach performance decorum to a boys’ choir. You can channel their restless energy through kinesthetic movements that enhance their vocal technique or musical phrasing.

The key to utilizing kinesthetic movements effectively throughout a rehearsal is to hook every movement to a specific goal. Identify a particular challenge that
your ensemble is experiencing and create a movement to help address that challenge. The following are three examples of how directed movement can enhance both rehearsal and performance techniques:

**Challenge:** My choir is having trouble transitioning from their falsetto into their changed voice.

**Kinesthetic solution:** Have students begin in the falsetto and perform five-note descending and ascending slides. Using their hands, have them draw the pitches in the air from their forehead level down to the belly then back up again. Do this very slowly, making sure that their hands are in sync with the pitch location. A good place to start is in G-major (above middle C) and continue the exercise down through the transition into the changed voice. This exercise will help young men identify gaps and pitch challenges they may be experiencing and will strengthen those areas.

**Challenge:** My choir doesn’t sing consistently with forward-placed vowels, resulting in a pulled-back tone and throaty resonance.

**Kinesthetic solution:** Have students place their index finger on their upper front teeth. Instruct them to place their tone on their teeth and not allow their upper lip to fall and touch their finger. They should look as if they are biting an apple. Although not a movement, it is a kinesthetic sensation that the young men can attach to proper tonal placement.

**Challenge:** My choir is not maintaining energy throughout the phrase resulting in flatness and overall lack of zest in the tone.

**Kinesthetic solution:** To achieve an energized tone, have the boys use their index finger to “pull” the air as they sing. Instruct them to “tie” their air to their index finger and pull throughout the phrase or on a particular pitch that is tending to drop and lose energy. This motion can be effective by pulling away from or across the body. It can help keep the pitch from going flat and can also help achieve a forward placement of the vowels.

There are numerous ways to incorporate kinesthetic movements into your choral rehearsal, and they are tried and proven methods for teaching all choirs, regardless of gender. Using these movements specifically with an all-male choir will help harness their natural tendency to fidget and channel it into an effective and productive teaching tool. The key is the director’s insistence that all members participate in the specified movement.

**Limit Distractions**

Another behavioral fact about teenage boys is that they are easily distracted by anything happening around them. These distractions can be as simple as a door opening, a neighbor dropping a piece of music, another student’s behavior across the room, or even a piece of fuzz flying through the air. (I once lost an entire tenor section for quite a while as they followed a feather’s descent from the ceiling to the floor.) Do not allow them to become distracted by the mundane. You must become the focus of their attention, not by asking for it but by demanding it. This concept is often the most challenging for many choir directors because it requires them to change their entire approach with their boys’ choir. It requires tenacity, strict behavioral expectations, and a stubborn streak that stretches for miles. One must always remember that excellence is achieved through attention to details, and that no detail is too small. Have a system in place for everything—from how they enter the room to how they hold their music during sightreading. If your boys become distracted and do not follow procedure, then you must make them do it again. Did I mention this would require tenacity?

Don’t settle for even one student not following a specific procedure. Young men thrive under clearly defined expectations. Tell your boys what to do, expect them to do it, and make them do it again if the expectation is not met. It will feel tedious at times, and you may experience resistance from some of your choir members at first, but the more you insist upon compliance, the more your rag-tag group of boys will become a winning team and a fantastic choir.

**Capitalize on Their Energy**

These young men are also incredibly enthusiastic about almost everything in which they participate. They have wonderful and boundless energy that is often mislabeled as hyperactive. This energy, however, is merely a means through which they express themselves. They are creatures of action and activity. They are *not* calm and sedate beings.
who will sit passively as a rehearsal progresses. Focus their boundless energy into a driving force behind an energetic tone and performance.

Planning your rehearsal with this knowledge will help you capitalize on their energy and enthusiasm. Begin your warm-ups ten seconds prior to the tardy bell rather than ten seconds after. This lights a fire under your boys to be in their seats on time. Transition quickly from one activity to the next so there is very little down time in rehearsal. Set goals so that you know exactly what you want accomplished during the course of the rehearsal. Save all announcements until the end of class. Beginning a boys’ choir rehearsal by having them sit and listen is the quickest way to lose their focus.

Finally, over-plan rather than under-plan your rehearsal. This holds especially true at the beginning of the school year. As you get to know your choir, you will be able to better determine your rehearsal time table. Never allow down time to become a part of your rehearsal. Just as boys need the structure of clearly defined procedures, they also need the structure of a clearly and carefully planned rehearsal. A busy choir is a productive choir. The responsibility for this rests squarely on the director’s shoulders.

Use Their Competitive Nature

A final, very important trait of the young adolescent male is his competitive nature. All teachers have witnessed this—the race to see who gets to the door first, who can eat the most pizza, who can go longest without speaking (like that’s going to happen!), who can sing the highest/lowest, and the list goes on. To young men, everything is a competition to be the best, so use this competitive nature to inspire them to be the very best. Whether it is a simple daily contest for who sightreads the best or a weekly contest for Section of the Week, tapping into the competitive nature of the male psyche will ultimately produce a better choir.

While some might view these personality traits exclusively as challenges to overcome, they can also be the very characteristics that lead a boys’ choir to success. The challenge is to take these traits—the restlessness, the easy distraction, the boundless energy, and the competitive nature—and channel them into creating a choir of intensity, creativity and enthusiasm. Once again, it all comes back to the language we use with the choir. Young men should be spoken to using the language of strength. Choir directors should take on the persona of coach, not cheerleader. Speak to them as men and not little boys; yet always remind them that to be treated as men, they must act like men.

Most of all, remember to laugh. Laugh with them, laugh at them, and laugh at yourself. Young adolescent males are some of the smartest, funniest, and most creative students we teach. By practicing some of these strategies, choir directors will soon better understand their young men and build better relationships with them. Allow them to be who they are and help them channel the excess into becoming great singers, great choirs, and great people.

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