

“The Development of a Choral Instrument”
based on an article by Howard Swan

Presented by Joe Cerutti

***Recordings provided by:
Stephen C. Pagano and the
Freeport High School Select Choral***

Opening Statement

There are six choral “schools of thought” that in theory and practice have greatly influenced choral singing in America. Each of the six schools espouse specific philosophies, techniques and goals developed by a master teacher and put in to practice by his followers.

Choir A

John Finley Williamson – Westminster Choir

“vitality of tone,” voice class, encourage each singer to develop personally, intellectually, and musically. You are important. Differences are recognized, “lift,” vowel modification, seating, steeple balance, diction taught by a series of rules, natural vibrato encouraged, choral sound must communicate emotion.

What we hear:

Full, dark weighty and vibrant sound;
emphasis on meaning of text;
dynamic contrast.

We do not hear:

Emphasis on blend,
emphasis on rhythmic phrasing;
legato singing, thin texture.

Choir B

Father William J. Finn – Paulist Choristers

“Music is the most powerful spiritual instrumentality by which human beings can be moved.” Chorophony – “beauty of tone.” Develop singers tone color according to that of an orchestral instrument. All vocalization will have an effect on tone color. Each song’s text and genre will determine the sounds used.

Vowels will be used to imitate timbres of instruments:
ee – strings, oo – flute, ah – reed, aw – horn.

What we hear:

A small, bright, thin, floating tone,
an excellent blend;
soft dynamic.

We do not hear:

Big voices;
rhythmic vitality, excellent diction;
dark voices; emotional interpretation.

Choir C

F. Melius Christiansen – Saint Olaf Choir

Weston Noble – Nordic Choir

“The tone of a choir is it’s greatest asset.” By its very nature good ensemble quality exists only as individual concepts disappear.

Blending – matching vowels and tone, model voice, tune chords, begin with unison, solo vibrato is discouraged, balance by exact numbers, audition repeat and imitate, unification of vowels, legato phrasing and placement of singers.

“Sing long on the vowel, lock the chords.”

What we hear:

The ultimate choral blend;
precision attack and release;
vowels on the beat, precise intonation.

We do not hear:

Rhythmic elements expressed in sound;
vibrato; big tone; extreme resonance; great dynamic contrast.

Choir D

Fred Waring – The Pennsylvanians

“All the beauty of all the sounds, of all the syllables, of all the words.” Tone Syllables. “Diction is used to achieve balance and unity.” First professional choir in the field of entertainment. The “father” of the show choir.

All sounds have a “slot” in time.

Exaggerate vowel sounds and consonants with pitched duration, turning of the diphthong, continuity of word to word, syllable to syllable.

Write specific vowels underneath the words.

What we hear:

Tone is comfortably sung;
splendid diction; “speech in song.”

We do not hear:

Full operatic tone, light fluty male voices, changes in color,
evidence of singers being taught in the classical model.

Choir E

John C. Wilcox, Joseph J. Klein and Douglas Stanley – Operatic Choruses

Singing is “scientific”. The scientific method will teach each singer to reach full potential by improving their solo voices by means of: extending range, increasing volume, improving tone, and developing a clear and natural vibrato.

Singers will work toward: three octave range, low larynx, full big dark operatic sound, loosen jaw, free tongue, and an acceptance of weak and strong registers to strengthen the vocal range. The correct phonation and support of tone demand unusual coordination of the various parts of the breathing mechanism.

What we hear:

A chorus of solo voices; huge vital sound;

We do not hear:

A tone exemplifying the usual choral standard;
balance; diction; clarity of ensemble.

Choir F

Robert Shaw – Robert Shaw Chorale

“The dramatic integrity of sound.”

“Music is order in sound,” pitch, tone, dynamics, speech, and rhythm.

“Time is music’s canvas.” Each performance is the first performance.

“Tone carries the emotion, not the words.”

“Pronounce all the sounds of the words, not the words themselves.”

Every sound has its own “slot.”

Count Sing, 16 point half step. In the audition, the choir member is “weighted” for seating. Singers will move from part to part to achieve balance. “You are not following a beat, you are making a beat.”

What we hear:

Rhythmic elements felt by singers; exciting uses of tone color.

We do not hear:

emphasis on expressive rubato;

elements of musical sound and interpretation divorced from the score.

Summary

The six choral schools often have similar concepts or goals. Some of these “cross over” ideas between schools can be a result of direct contact. The conductor/singer today should be aware of the sound he/she desires and the technical facility to achieve that sound. The responsibility is to understand style in reference to sound and work toward the goal of serving the music.