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Decoding the Music Language: The Key Ingredient for an Independent Musician

A Master's Paper
By
Natalie Andreoli

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Abstract

The purpose of my research was to examine sight-singing strategies from both the teacher and student perspective. I examined the teaching of two high school choral directors in "Summer Spring", FL. Data sources included an interview with the directors, artifacts from a conference presentation by the directors, field notes from class observations and a student survey. The student survey included questions regarding the students' perceptions of various sight-singing strategies. Data from the interviews revealed four themes related to the success of sight-singing instruction: anchor points, environment, individual accountability, and resources. These themes were supported by the live classroom observations and the student surveys. Anchor points are a sight-singing strategy in which students find all occurrences of the pitches "do-mi-sol" within a musical example. Environment was shown through classroom strategies and making signing an obvious priority. In regard to individual accountability, students were expected to be ready with individual answers during class, and auditions for choral ensembles included a sight-singing component. A helpful resource for "Michael" and "Sally" in structuring sight-singing instruction and assessment is the Florida State Assessment Rubric. The Florida state manual dictates the expectations at six levels in terms of rhythm, melody, and harmony.

Student's perceptions of helpful sight-singing strategies were ranked in the following order, from most helpful to least helpful: solfege syllables, hand signs, scale degree numbers, and isolation of rhythm and pitch. Their own sight-singing strategies favored anchor points, hand signs, and solfege. Over 50% of the students
surveyed did not agree with the statement, "When sight-singing a piece of music, I feel confident."
Background

As a novice music educator taking over a large middle school choral program in New York, I was faced with many new challenges. Pressures of the upcoming concerts led me to focus on teaching pitches and relying heavily on the piano for fast teaching of repertoire. I did not encourage my students to read the score. However, in order to use the score, students must have a basic knowledge of the foreign language in front of them: the music notation. I was not teaching my students the theory behind the written notation or strategies for singing at sight. The question then came to me: Are teachers providing young students with the tools necessary to produce rhythm and pitch at sight? I wondered what materials and strategies already existed to help music teachers incorporate literacy into the choral rehearsal. In addition, I wondered about the attitudes and perceptions of students regarding sight-singing.

First, why is music reading such an important skill for adolescent singers? After all, rote learning has been the primary means of transmission in most cultures throughout history. I believe that students should have the ability and option to learn songs by rote or through the written score. By learning new repertoire in various ways, students are able to utilize more than one method for? Students who can sight-read will not depend on recordings when they wish to learn something new. Students can also produce a more accurate reproduction of the composer’s intent, without the risk of listening to an inaccurate performance. One goal I have in my own teaching is for students to have a life-long relationship with the written score.
Research suggests that sight-singing assessment at interscholastic choral festivals and contests might cause music educators to increase instructional time devoted to the teaching of sight-singing. However, the assessment of sight-singing at large group interscholastic festivals is not reflective of the research-identified positive attitudes about the importance of sight-singing instruction, nor with the expectations outlined in the National Standards (Norris, 2004). This article led me to question the nationwide emphasis placed on sight-singing and if choral music teachers incorporate sight-singing achievement into their students’ overall marking period grade.

When providing students with sight-singing instruction, I would venture to say the focus of most teachers, including myself, is on the familiar, the musical content (pitch and rhythm). However, according to Henry (2008), students should be guided through procedural skills as well. Some of these skills include establishing the key vocally before reading, using hand signs, singing out loud during the practice period, keeping the beat in the body, making sure to get through the entire melody, isolating trouble spots, skipping easier spots, and setting a steady tempo (Henry, 2008). Henry’s article presented me with a different perspective on the procedural tools that students need to succeed in an individual sight-singing assessment.

How do we provide young singers with the tools necessary to read and interpret a piece of repertoire on their own while simultaneously preparing for an upcoming concert? The director committed to teaching music reading has a responsibility to integrate reading challenges in the teaching of a new piece, so sight-singing is presented not as an isolated academic exercise, but as a skill central
to good choral singing (Demorest, 1998). Some of Demorest’s suggestions include having all students sight-sing the melody and sing a well-known tune on syllables to build connections between the syllable system and musical patterns. When reading counterpoint, he suggests that students learn the opening motive and then sing this main motive with text and the accompanying counterpoint on solfege or a neutral syllable, reinforcing balance.

Summary – bring section to conclusion – perhaps preview the method -

Literature Review

After a review of several articles, I discovered three crucial areas: sight-singing strategies used by students, effective methods of incorporating sight-singing into the choral rehearsal, and the materials used to provide and reinforce sight-singing instruction.


In 2008, Henry conducted a study to investigate the effectiveness of teaching individual singers to employ specific behaviors during their sight-singing preparation time that have been linked with high achievement. Behaviors include finding “do,” using hand signs, vocalized practice, physically keeping the beat, completing the entire melody during the allotted practice time, isolating trouble spots, skipping easy parts, and setting a steady tempo. Behaviors linked with low achievement include abandoning the steady beat, stopping during singing, taking eyes off of the music, shifting around, and making excuses.
Half of the participants received instruction about behaviors linked to high and low achievement and participated in peer teaching. The other half of participants received information about vocal production during their instruction time. Sight-reading procedures were not addressed to the second group.

Data revealed that the low-scoring participants (pretest) achieved a significant gain on the posttest measure, while high-scoring individuals did not improve on the posttest. The number of desirable behaviors used during practice and performance from pretest to posttest significantly increased for the overall sample. Therefore, instruction in employing strategies did make a significant difference in a certain population’s achievement. “Learning some productive things to do during this time may have allowed some of these singers to make effective use of the preparation period for the first time” (Henry, 2008, p. 15). High-scoring singers already employ many positive strategies when practicing and performing sight-reading.


The purpose of Norris’ study was to examine sight-singing requirements at junior and senior high school large-group ratings-based festivals throughout the United States. The goal was to survey the nationwide emphasis placed on sight-reading. Results indicate that half of the states that offer adjudicated choral festivals for junior high and high school also require sight-singing assessment. About three-fourths of states that require sight-singing for middle school and high school have established varying degrees and levels of proficiency. About half of the states
requiring sight-singing at the junior high and high school levels have established content guidelines or used the sight-singing rating in determining a final overall rating for the ensemble. “At a time when accountability is a major concern for all educational entities, it seems odd that there are so few state-delineated guidelines for achievement in what is commonly perceived as a most important musical skill” (Norris, 2004, p. 23). This research has shown that assessment may result in increased time given to sight-singing instruction.


Kuehne developed a questionnaire to gather data on the role and use of sight-singing in Florida instructional settings. Most middle school choral directors agreed with using movable “do” with self-created exercises or concert literature. The results for piano use indicate some dependence on piano, with most agreeing the piano was necessary when teaching sight-singing. However, almost forty percent of the respondents indicated that they use the piano initially and then decrease usage as the students become more proficient. Although most respondents agreed on elements and materials used in teaching sight-singing, they disagreed on the order in which skills should be taught. Most thought teaching staff notation and aural skills together was best. The author also noted the importance of higher education music and method professors to note that they do have influence on the sight-singing practices of future educators.

The purpose of McClung’s study was to determine whether high school choir students who had received training in sight-singing using movable “do” solfege syllables and Curwen hand signs scored higher with or without the use of the Curwen hand signs.

Data revealed no significant difference in scores between participants with and without hand signs. Students with instrumental experience scored significantly higher with the use of hand signs than students without instrumental experience. Students without instrumental experience scored significantly higher when not using hand signs. There was a low correlation between class grade and sight-singing scores with and without hand signs. There was a moderate correlation between sight-singing scores with hand signs and years of sight-singing experience. After informal interviews, responses fell into three classifications of student preference, including no hand sign gesture (eighteen percent), a general rise-and-fall hand gesture (fifty-seven percent), and specific hand sign gestures (twenty-three percent).

This study shows that there are no significant differences in sight-singing scores with or without the use of Curwen hand signs. However, the finding involving instrumentalists might have to do with kinesthetic requirements of the instrumental experience. “It is reasonable to acknowledge a possible connection between kinesthetic skills required to play an instrument and the kinesthetic skills required to use Curwen hand signs effectively” (McClung, 2008, p. 263). This article
presented the argument that Curwen hand sign training might benefit some students, while putting others at a disadvantage.

We know that specific behaviors during sight-singing preparation time are linked with high achievement (Henry, 2008). Data reveals no significant difference in sight-singing scores between participants with and without hand signs (McClung, 2008). It appears that the nation-wide emphasis placed on sight-singing is not consistent at large-group ratings-based festivals, despite its emphasis in the National Standards (Norris, 2004). Upon exploring this topic further, there seems to be little literature addressing student perceptions of the sight-singing process. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine sight-singing strategies from both the teacher and student perspective.

(In this case study, I sought out two experts in the choral education field and attended their presentation on sight-singing at the Eastern Division ACDA convention in Philadelphia. I completed a one-hour interview with the experts and then surveyed their high school choral students in Summer Springs, FL). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to highlight successful sight-singing strategies presented by teachers AND used by students, both musical and procedural. The following questions guided my investigation:

-What are effective strategies used by successful choral music teachers to incorporate sight-singing instruction into the choral rehearsal?
-What types of materials are these teachers using to provide sight-singing instruction?
-What are the students’ perceptions of sight-singing? Which strategies do they feel are most successful?

Method

In the form of a case study, I have investigated the strategies and materials used by two high school choral directors when teaching sight-singing in their chorus rehearsals. The directors were chosen based on a strong recommendation made by my choral method professors at Penn State University. “Michael Scope” and his colleague, “Sally Hmong” were selected as presenters at the American Choral Director’s Association (ACDA) Eastern Division convention in Philadelphia in February, 2010. They are both choral music educators at Summer Springs High School, located in suburban Orlando in the affluent community of Summer Springs. Summer Springs High School is part of the 11th largest school district in the United States. Michael and Sally direct six co-curricular vocal ensembles and four extracurricular vocal ensembles. Both directors participated in a one-hour interview with me during the 2010 Eastern Division ACDA convention. Questions regarding sight-singing instruction were discussed, and the interview was recorded and transcribed. Planned questions were based on themes from the literature and my own experiences teaching public school choirs. Question covered such topics as 1) musical and non-musical sight-singing strategies, 2) the use of choral repertoire to teach skills, 3) materials, 4) assessment, 5) motivation, and 6) various syllabic systems (see attached).
During the ACDA convention, I also attended Michael and Sally’s session, “Choral Repertoire: The Gateway to Sight-singing.” During this presentation, I took field notes and collected artifacts. The presentation included a demonstration of sight-singing strategies and procedures used in Michael and Sally’s high school choral rehearsals. A list was distributed of recommended resources and materials.

After the interview and ACDA session observation process in Philadelphia, I traveled to Summer Springs, FL in March, 2010 to survey Michael and Sally’s high school choral students and to observe choral rehearsals. The survey was designed based on information from the literature, my interview with Michael and Sally, and my observation and artifacts collected from their presentation at ACDA. The twenty-minute survey included questions regarding the students’ perceptions of various sight-reading strategies, as well as their thoughts and reflections concerning the process (see attached).

The final step in my data collection process was to observe Michael and Sally in a live choral rehearsal at Summer Springs High School. I attended a rehearsal of the Concert Choir, an ensemble comprised of intermediate 10th-12th grade students that Michael and Sally co-teach. This “in action” observation allowed me to record field notes on the instruction of sight-singing and to compare it to the interview and ACDA interest session field notes. During the rehearsal, I asked myself, “How are Michael and Sally applying the strategies that they discussed prior with me to the students in front of them?” This observation enhanced the validity of my findings and provided rich description for the case study.
Triangulation of the data was established by gathering the teachers’ perspectives, the students’ perspectives, artifacts from the ACDA workshop, and observation in a natural setting. Data collection tools included a recording of the interview, field notes from Philadelphia and Summer Springs, artifacts, and student surveys. Data was analyzed and coded for themes. The survey provided quantitative, descriptive data that provided me with knowledge of the students’ levels of comfort with various sight-singing strategies. The open-ended survey questions were coded for themes in order to provide a further understanding of the individual student’s thoughts. As a result of this investigation, a list of successful sight-singing instruction strategies and materials was constructed for future reference.

Discussion

After reviewing the transcript of the interview with Michael and Sally and reviewing artifacts from their session, I identified four themes that were supported by the classroom observation. These themes include anchor points, environment, individual accountability, and resources.

Theme 1: Use of Anchor Points

Anchor points are a sight-singing strategy in which students find the “do-mi-sol” of a musical example. Before sight-singing begins, Michael and Sally establish the key, have students sing the scale on solfege syllables, and then sing the anchor points with hand signs. With their younger choirs, they introduce sight-singing exercises in C major and have students circle the anchor points (C-E-G) in the score. A strategy that I observed at Summer Springs High School included having students
sing only the anchor points in an exercise. Then, gradually, the students would sing
more pitches (aside from “do-mi-sol”), until they were sight-singing the entire
excerpt. Anchor points serve as a building block for Michael and Sally’s tiered choral
program. Upon asking them how they differentiate sight-singing instruction at
various skill levels, I received the following response:

In a lot of our warm-ups, we use solfege syllables, so the students are living it
before they’re necessarily understanding it, so then it makes sense when we
start to apply it to the paper. So, obviously with our beginning groups we’re
going to start with all step-wise motion within just “do” to “sol.” Then
eventually starting to introduce anchor points and what not. If we get
through anchor points successfully by the end of their first year, then it’s a
happy day (Michael, Interview, 2010).

Data indicates that the students at Summer Springs High School find anchor points
to be extremely helpful when sight-singing. Thirty-two of the 33 surveyed students
sing anchor points prior to sight-singing an excerpt for the first time. Many students
feel confident in their ability to identify anchor points in the score. On a scale of 1-5,
with 5 indicating greatest comfort, the average comfort level among all respondents
was a 4.7. A large number of students also wrote about the effectiveness of anchor
points in the open response section of the survey. ‘By identifying the anchors, if I
ever get lost in the music, I can easily get back on track by finding “do”, “mi”, or “sol”’
(Student Survey, 2010).

Theme 2: Positive Classroom Environment
Another theme throughout the data is establishing a positive classroom environment for sight-singing. One strategy used to foster this environment is called “Think, Pair, Share.” Sally first described this activity to me in our interview. Often, when she and Michael teach a brand new sight-singing concept, such as a specific leap or interval, they will introduce the skill and allow a designated amount of time for students to “work it out” with a partner. Student pairs make sure that they both understand the concept. Sally says that sometimes students are too afraid to come and talk to the teacher, admitting that they do not understand a concept. “But when a peer does it, they feel much more safe. And then we are all winners in the end because it helps the group, it helps them, and we all feel really good about that” (Sally, Interview, 2010). During my observation, I noticed that the students were given time to sing an exercise with a partner before the large group reading. These short moments of chaos proved to be very effective. Each student was actively engaged, using hand signs, and singing through the excerpt with a neighbor at their own pace. Several students wrote about the strategy of mouthing and singing through the solfege syllables and having time to audiate the pitches before singing an exercise. “I think when you sing and sign the solfege before you sing it, it is a lot easier. That way you know what the challenging parts are and you have already worked them out in your head” (Student Survey, 2010).

Another important factor in creating an ideal environment for sight-singing is the teacher's projected belief system.

Every child deserves to be taught to read music, just like they should be taught to read in general. And I feel very strongly that it starts with
the teacher. If a teacher strongly believes in it, then they will instill that in their students. But the teacher really needs to come forward. If they are not feeling comfortable with doing sight-singing, everybody has to start somewhere (Sally, Interview, 2010).

It is evident that this belief system, shared by Michael and Sally, has impacted the students at Summer Springs High School. Thirty out of thirty-three students surveyed rated the belief that sight-singing is an important skill with a 5 (strongly agree). An average of 4.5 was reported by students when rating their motivation to be a successful sight-reader. “If you make it the hallmark of your program, as we do with sight-singing, then the kids are going to buy into it because you are passionate about it and you buy into it” (Michael, Interview, 2010).

**Theme 3: Individual Accountability**

One of the reasons that students at Summer Springs High School have success in sight-singing is the implemented element of individual accountability. Michael and Sally sit down at the beginning of each year and determine what students should know about music theory by the end of the year.

All students should know their sharps and flats in order. All students should be able to identify key signatures by the first year and explain how to get a flat and sharp key signature in major and minor, which helps us as building blocks in the second, third, and fourth years (Sally, Interview, 2010).

Student knowledge of theory was apparent to me in my observation of the Concert Choir. Students were called on randomly and individually to identify key signatures, names of sharps and flats, time signatures, anchor points, and to explain the process
by which they determined the above answers. Most students at Summer Springs High School reported confidence in identifying key signatures (average 4.3). In describing motivation to improve in sight-singing, one student wrote, “When we are called on to sing by ourselves, that really motivates me. It's hard to sing in front of your directors but even harder to sing in front of your peers. I like to be well prepared in any skill before performing it by myself” (Student Survey, 2010).

Another example of individual accountability is represented in the audition process. Michael and Sally operate a tiered choir system. So, with the exception of the freshman students, whom are automatically placed into certain beginner ensembles, students’ auditions at the end of the school year are crucial in determining their placement for the following year. A tiered choir system allows Michael and Sally to place students where they need to be and where will best benefit their individual growth. “We are firm believers that if you don't have the skills, regardless of how great your tone is or your musicianship, you aren't going to be in an advanced ensemble if you can't sight-read” (Michael, Interview, 2010).

Students complete a two-pronged audition. The first is based on skills and voice quality. Students perform various excerpts, testing their achievement in rhythm, tonal memory, and melodic sight-reading. They are given a choral octavo from which they need to discern their part with the accompaniment. The second audition is a callback to check balance and blend. Students are motivated to improve sight-singing skills in order to be placed in a select ensemble. “What motivates me is getting into Belles, an advanced choir. We must sight-sing to be considered” (Student Survey, 2010). Another student wrote, “To get into Park Singers is my best
motivation. To get into Park requires excellent sight-singing skills” (Student Survey, 2010).

Theme 4: Resources

Michael and Sally utilize many resources in their quest to provide excellent sight-singing instruction. A large resource for them is the Florida State Assessment Rubric. The Florida state manual dictates the expectations at six levels in terms of rhythm, melody, and harmony.

So, we can guide ourselves through the state manual saying that all of our beginning choirs will start with levels 1 & 2. At the intermediate level, we can review 1 & 2 and then move on to 3 & 4. And the more advanced choirs will end with levels 5 & 6 and beyond (Sally, Interview, 2010).

Aside from Florida, other state models suggested in our interview include the Texas model and the Maryland model. Helpful guidelines regarding sight-singing in tune, while using hand signs, with good breath support and beautiful vowels are outlined in these manuals. Michael and Sally discussed how sight-singing includes more than rhythm and pitch. Teachers should hold students accountable for excellent vowels, phrasing, and breathing at every sight-singing level. Michael and Sally base their individual assessments on the Florida model, often sharing the same rubric. Florida also has a sight-reading choir, which is the top all-state choir.

For us, we went from our first year having two students in that choir to having eight make the sight-reading choir this year. That has been a big push for us. We take great pride in that, and it is a kind of extrinsic factor for kids to work toward (Michael, Interview, 2010).
Michael and Sally recommend that every choral director own the book “Building Choral Excellence,” a compilation of choral techniques and sight-singing strategies by Stephen Demorest. They use games and techniques from the book and enjoy how Demorest provides many options for choral teachers to choose from, never claiming that there is one “it factor” for teaching these skills. Upon asking Michael and Sally about the resources they use when assessing students or integrating sight-singing into the rehearsal, their response was, “we use it all!”

In our presentation, there is an excerpt from a Bach Chorale, where its melody is from a Bach Chorale. So, we might take something like that, so they're at least reading real music, as oppose to something that is just an exercise. But exercises have their value sometimes too. If the primary focus is all step-wise motion, sometimes it is just easier and more beneficial to go to an exercise book (Michael, Interview, 2010).

A compilation list of hard copy and online resources was provided at Michael and Sally's ACDA interest session (see appendix).

Student Perceptions

One important aspect of this study was gathering the student perspective. Many results from the survey were shared regarding the themes stated above. In addition, supplemental questions were posed to the students.

Upon surveying the students at Summer Springs High School, data revealed that students’ perceptions of helpful sight-singing strategies were ranked in the following order, from most helpful to least helpful: solfege syllables, hand signs, scale degree numbers, isolation of rhythm and pitch. When asked to identify
procedures used in their individual sight-singing process, 97% of students identify anchor points and use hand signs. 94% of students sight-sing use solfege syllables and 91% physically keep a steady beat, while only 70% of students examine melodic contour and identify specific intervals.

Another response of interest involves student confidence, or nervousness, regarding sight-singing. Over 50% of the students surveyed did not agree with the statement, “When sight-singing a piece of music, I feel confident.” I find this interesting, given the number of sight-singing strategies that the students at Summer Springs High School are exposed to and feel comfortable using.

Conclusions/Applications

Choral teachers can enhance sight-singing instruction by creating a positive classroom environment, holding individuals accountable for their own learning, using established resources like state rubrics, and presenting introductory strategies such as anchor points. I have observed the effectiveness of anchor point instruction. This strategy provides students with an awareness of tonality and three pitches to sing successfully. Many of the surveyed students commented on their ability to get back on track, after being lost in an exercise, through the use of anchor points.

Strategies, such as isolating anchor points in a given exercise, sight-singing with Curwen hand signs, think-pair-share, and allowing time for students to “work it out” on their own, seem to be extremely valuable. Students commented on the benefit of having time to audiate the pitches and work out the solfege before sight-
singing with the ensemble. Encouraging students to master key signatures and calling on individuals during rehearsal seems to stimulate motivation to improve. (how is this last point supported?) The sight-singing component of the audition process also motivates students to improve their sight-singing skills. Individual assessment is another helpful strategy. Research suggests that individual testing (?) Not sure if/how this is set up?) is a useful technique in making the transfer of skills learned as a group to individual performance, while providing valuable information on student progress (Demorest, 1998).

Another interesting topic that emerged in the interview with Michael and Sally is the idea of sight-singing more than rhythm and pitch. (refer back to point in introduction?) Students should be encouraged to sight-sing with a beautiful tone and the same technique used when singing a repertoire selection. Students should be accountable for excellent vowels, even when singing on solfege. When sight-singing, students should sing musical lines with phrasing, breathe at the punctuation, and follow dynamic markings. All of these habits can be fostered and practiced during the sight-singing process.

Data from this study (?) suggests that teachers who make sight-singing a key component of their choral program will win the motivation of their students.

I’m driven to improve my sight-reading because I think it’s completely amazing to take a piece of paper with a song written on it and be able to sing that song without ever having heard the piece before. Sight-reading is a way to create music without requiring anything other than a brain and a voice (Student Survey, 2010).
Many students share the enthusiasm of the quotation above (evidence from observation, survey, both?). They are motivated to improve their sight-singing skills in order to be independent musicians.

The majority of surveyed students identified “tricky intervals” as the most challenging aspect of sight-singing. Perhaps teachers can spend more time on the review of specific intervals, incorporating aural skills with identification of leaps in the score.

Ideas for future exploration include analyzing factors related to student confidence when sight-singing and the existing disconnect between singing intervals correctly in warm-ups and reading the same intervals successfully in the score. Another area of interest might include studying the value of sound before sight. Can students be expected to sing patterns at sight that they haven’t heard before? Another area for exploration, focusing particularly on young men, is examining the transition from sight-singing an exercise to sight-singing the repertoire, with changes in staves and clefs.
References


