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Vocal Pedagogy

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Browse Report on Dillon's Female Voice Classification and the Choral Director

According to Audrey Helena Dillon, "Voice Classification presents a paradox to the choral director" (Dillon, 59). This notion rings true in the world of vocal music, specifically with regard to choral singing. Classifying one's voice is often done haphazardly; singers often are pigeonholed into a single vocal part in the choir, whether based on range, ability, or to fill a need for balance in the ensemble. Moreover, these decisions often neglect crucial components of singing, like vocal health or the maturation of the voice. In her article, Dillon details the dangers of vocal misclassification, specifically with regard to the female voice, along with ways to better classify the voice, with the aim of educating the unformed choral director.

Dillon details five characteristics of the voice, all of which must be taken into account when choir directors seek to determine the most appropriate voice parts for their students. These factors are physical characteristics (body size, and size of anatomy relevant to vocal production), timbre (the vocal quality), passaggio (area of register transition), tessitura (most comfortable portion of a singer's range), and range (all functional pitches a singer can produce). It is important to note that none of these elements alone can accurately pinpoint the proper part on which to place a voice. Unfortunately, quite often vocalists are misclassified, and placed on ill-fitting voice parts.

Vocal misclassification occurs for a variety of reasons, within the choral setting especially. Dillon specifically references the need for balance among choral sections, the lack of

considering all five vocal characteristics when classifying voices, students' lack of prior formal vocal experiences, the abundance of range-inappropriate repertoire, and the contemporary trend toward the "vocal belt style" in popular music, which does not always accurately reflect a singer's natural voice type. Any and all of these concepts can contribute to the widespread vocal misclassification occurring in choirs.

Dillon brings up another important consideration when working with voices: the changing voice. Though males more obviously experience this phenomenon, it is not absent from female development. This should frequently be taken into account when working with students' voices, to avoid placing them on parts that are unattainable at their stage of development. To navigate the female voice change as a choral director, an effort should be made to destigmatize the natural process. Additionally, Dillon sources other vocal pedagogues, who suggest ways to accommodate changing voices; neutral classifications, such as trebles I and II, and "equal voice theory," with varying parts of equivalent ranges, both can aid choirs, directors, and singers with overcoming the obstacles posed by changing voices.

In terms of overcoming vocal misclassification as a whole, simple steps can be taken, which Dillon details. Frequent voice testing, especially during periods of vocal development and maturation, can help consistently check to make sure vocalists are placed accordingly. In addition, careful testing of voices, which considers all five vocal characteristics, while prioritizing the needs of the individual voice over the needs of the ensemble, can lead to better vocal classifications: "Both the individual singer and the choral ensemble benefit greatly from careful classification of individual voices" (Dillon, 61). Ultimately, it seems as though the best way to combat vocal misclassification is through making informed choice and becoming educated on the nebulous area of vocal classification.

I personally highly enjoyed the article. I feel as though Dillon did a great job detailing the logic behind her stances, without delving into too much technical jargon or difficult material. She clearly keeps her audience in mind; the goal of the article is to educate choral directors in the practice of vocal classification, and it does just that. My only direct issue is a negligible one: I feel as though everything in the article pertains equally to male voices, save for her brief detailing of the typical progression of female development and vocal maturation. However, this does not remotely detract from the article's value and relevance. I would highly recommend the article to any vocalist or choir director curious about the process of vocal classification.