“Through the Change”
Understanding & Educating the Adolescent Male Voice

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ABSTRACT
At Adolescence, age 12 -14, boys begin the hormonal change of puberty. A noticeable development of this age is the change in voice, where pitch in both speaking and singing drops at about an octave. In an age where young men seek autonomy, independence, and peer acceptance, this new development causes self-consciousness and a fear to explore. With a thorough knowledge of how the voice changes, educators can guide their students through the change in a way that enhances the student both musically and socially.
“The Choir Boy”

In the 8th Century the Catholic Church emerged with a specialized group of music instructors called “The Schola Cantorum.”\(^1\) The main job of these instructors was to gather and educate young boys in music, so that they could perform for religious service. From Machaut to Haydn this tradition remained, due to the purity associated with a young boys voice. “Boy sopranos were sought for their clear, bell-like timbres, and choir masters invested several year in each chorister’s education. When a boy’s voice started to change and lose its high range at the onset of adolescence, he was immediately removed from the choir.”\(^2\) The Schola Cantorum believed to stop singing at the start of the voice change would preserve the voice, though historians argue that the Cantorum dismissed young adolescents due to the loss of purity.

This precedent, in addition to the separation of males & females, lasted until the 19th Century, where the “inclusive nature of the [American] public school system” inhibited the separation of males and females & changed and unchanged voices.\(^3\) This change slowly transferred to Europe, and in 1955 Duncan McKenzi, an English choirmaster, published *Training the Boy’s Changing Voice*. This publication was the first to describe and outline the modern view choral educators hold today; “Declaring that the practice of removing boys with changing voices from choirs was

\(^1\) Kendra Kay Friar. "Changing Voices, Changing Times; Recent developments in changing-voice theory can help adolescent boys and girls ‘through the change.’” *Music Educators Journal* (Nov 1999), 26-29.

\(^2\) Ibid.

\(^3\) Ibid.
[is] no longer acceptable.”¹ McKenzi provided guidelines for educators who struggled teaching through “the change of voice,” and prescribed the first “voice classifications” that prompted study and interested for many researchers and educators.²

The Young Adolescent Voice

Before a discussion of “the change of voice,” there needs to be a basic discussion of the young voice. At Infancy the voice can access tones from vocal fry to high falsetto, but these tones are not able to be controlled or be heard as “tuneful.” The “tuneful” tones normally begin at pre-kindergarten, age 3/4, and increase through the sixth grade.³ In a study on vocal range, Debra Hedden recorded the vocal range throughout this age group. The results showed that at pre-kindergarten students displayed close to an octave range, and by first grade 67.4% of students can demonstrate a range well over an octave with that percentage increasing to 97.9% by the sixth grade.⁴ It is at this point, once children begin to have control and achievement with their voice, that the adolescent male voice begins to change.

The “voice change” is generally the first sign that an adolescent is going through puberty. This increase in hormone level lengthens and thickens the vocal folds about 10 millimeters, dropping both the speaking and singing voice by an

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¹ Kendra Kay Friar. “Changing Voices, Changing Times; Recent developments in changing-voice theory can help adolescent boys and girls ‘through the change.’” Music Educators Journal (Nov 1999), 26-29.
² Ibid.
⁴ Ibid.
octave.\textsuperscript{1} In addition the pharyngeal space increases, visibly seen by a broadening of the neck, and the muscles that control the laryngeal space begin to grow and strengthen.\textsuperscript{2} In addition to the lowering in pitch of the voice, these physical changes are noticed in a “crack” in the speaking voice; quick and uncontrollable switches from head, pre-pubescent voice, into chest voice.\textsuperscript{3} In the singing voice the first stages of change are subtle. The clear and “bell-like” tone characterized by an unchanged voice begins to loose its focus. The tone becomes breathy and the ease of the upper register decreases.\textsuperscript{4} Many have researched the changes and stages of this vocal development, but the most innovative and accepted is the work of John Cooksey.

Cooksey organized the voice change into six categories; Unchanged, Midvoice I, Midvoice II, Midvoice IIA, New Baritone and Settling Baritone. From Unchanged to Midvoice I the voice changes subtly, with the loss of focused tone and upper register. At Midvoice II students are in the final stage of “treble voice.”\textsuperscript{5} Vocal instability, where the voice cracks from head to chest, is at its peak during this phase, and students normally stay in this stage for a period of time or drop quickly to “New Baritone.”\textsuperscript{6} At this stage boys encounter two new sounds, a prominent chest voice and the appearance of falsetto: a hollow sound, closely related to the treble voice

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{1} Freer, Patrick K. *Getting Started with Middle School Chorus; Second Edition*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2009.
\item \textsuperscript{4} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{6} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
they once had.¹ For the majority of young adolescence, Junior High School, students stay in this stage, but then develop into a “Developing Baritone,” closely related to the adult bass-baritone, or to Midvoice IIA, closely related to the adult tenor. A detailed diagram of the Cooksey classification system is below, displaying range, comfortable tessitura and appearance of falsetto.²

![Diagram of Cooksey's classification system](image)

Cooksey's research clearly defines the stages of vocal development and suggests ages that they might occur at. But the voice change is unique to each individual singer, and cannot be definitively answered. Because of this a study was done at the American Boy Choir School, where both faculty and students were asked about the changing voice process. The following quotes are reflection on this process from two eighth-grade boys at the school.³

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² Ibid.
“I guess I’ll say that my voice change is probably the easiest of everyone here...Mine happened during the space of two moths during the summer. So, I was a Treble 1B when I left and I was a Bass when I came back.”

“When I came [in sixth grade], I went to RC as a treble 1A and then I went into CC and I was a treble 1B. During the school year, my [voice change] started...I couldn’t sing with all my strength. I was loosing notes and it [the voice] started to come down. Right now, I’m Alto 1.”

These two experiences prove the individuality of the voice change. The first quote describes a voice that began in Cooksey’s Midvoice I and changed to a New/Developing Baritone within two months. The other describes a three-year development of a voice, slowly dropping in pitch and still in a treble standing. Both students are the same age, one with a settled “adult” voice the other still in a treble classification. Due to the vast differences and uniqueness of each singer, the choral educator needs to be extremely aware of their students in order “to meet students vocal, emotional and aesthetic needs.”

**The Young Adolescent**

The voice change occurs at the most emotionally/psychologically unstable time for an adolescent. It is during this time that they begin to form a unique personality with basic values and attitudes. “Middle School Students are psychologically vulnerable, if only because at no other stage in development are they so likely to encounter so many differences between themselves and others.”

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2 Ibid.
Their characteristic and wants are interesting and troublesome due to the contradictions that occur. Adolescents are naturally curious and adventurous, yearning for independence and responsibility, but they constantly feel the need for approval and acceptance among their peers. And while they want approval, to be individually congratulated or praised is humiliating and causes self-consciousness. Though educating a student with so many emotions, let alone contradictory ones, may seem impossible an adolescent's most shining attribute makes it worthwhile; "They seek opportunities to engage in activities with inherit value."\(^1\)

Because of the multi-facets of the adolescent, education and training must involve group support and comradely, with individual details given to students so they realize the meaning in a personal way.

**Educating ”Through the Change.”**

In education we hope to bring students from a place of new knowledge to mastery. And though a vocal student may have had knowledge over their treble voice, the learning process restarts when the voice begins to change.\(^2\) The chart attached, presented by Judy Bowers in *Teaching Music Through*

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\(^2\)Judy Bowers, “Structuring Success in Beginning Middle School Choral Ensembles” in *Teaching Music through Performance in Middle School Choir.*
Performance in Middle School Choir, and describes the stages needed in order to bring “Novice Choral Singers,” new voice students, to a professional “expressive performance.”\(^1\) In this model “pitch matching” is used to find the vocal stage of the student, “tone building” is used to strengthen the vocal ability they currently have, and “Literature Hierarchy” refers to the appropriate range and style of performed music. An understanding of these three aspects, especially by the students, results in a knowledgeable and self-directed student.\(^2\)

The most important step in guiding a student through the voice change is the previously mentions “vocal stage” of the student. To find this Judy Bowers suggest to use a method created by Irving Cooper.\(^3\)

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\(^2\) Ibid.

\(^3\) Ibid.
With this voice classification system the educator honors the student by abiding to their social developments. Student’s only sing in groups, avoiding individual attention, and are kept aware of their voice type and the challenges they will face that way they see the value in what they are learning. With a system like Cooper’s, responsible and self-aware singers will emerge. An example of this can be seen in the before mentioned interviews at the American Boy Choir School;

“Like I have a big gap, and the gap usually changes every time I sing…it would be maybe middle C to G or D to G and usually my part goes up to that...During the warm-up, I have to find out where I can sing and so I know what I can do for that rehearsal.”

Once students have an understanding of their voice, the entire process, technique and learning literature, will become easier for the student.

Summary

In educating adolescent males it is important to recognize the following;

1) The voice change is a unique process to each singer. And in order to understand each singer, an educator must be aware of the different stages of the voice.

2) The voice change occurs during a difficult time for adolescents. The psychological wants for autonomy and acceptance must be realized and appreciated through the process.

3) In guiding students through this stage, educators must put effort into understanding and educating each individual and their voice, while adhering to their new emotional/psychological progress.

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Source Cited


Friar, Kendra Kay. “Changing Voices, Changing Times; Recent developments in changing-voice theory can help adolescent boys and girls ‘through the change.’” Music Educators Journal (Nov 1999), 26-29.

