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To Blend or Not to Blend: A Solo Singer's Guide to Singing in Choral Ensembles

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Many young singers begin their musical journey singing in a choir. Often, as they grow, the singers who also study solo singing begin to notice a difference between their ‘solo voice’ and their ‘choir voice’. The older and more experienced these singers get, particularly once they reach university level, the more of a line is drawn between solo singing and choral singing, sometimes even to the point of voice teachers or choral conductors discouraging singers to sing the other style. Margaret Olsen, in her book titled *The Solo Singer in the Choral Setting*, states:

Singers have traditionally modified their vocal technique to fully participate in the choral ensemble, to the dismay of some teachers of singing. Similarly, some solo singers and teachers have disregarded the value of choral singing, to the dismay of choral conductors.<sup>1</sup>

As Olson later says, echoed by Richard Miller in his article on a similar topic<sup>2</sup>, the conflict between these two styles of singing does not need to exist. It is possible for a singer to meet the demands of a choral ensemble healthily, without sacrificing their solo technique. If healthy vocal production is important to a singer, then embracing the differences between these two art forms is critical. On that same note, it means it is also important for vocal teachers to promote healthy singing in choir, and learn themselves how to help their students achieve that. Most issues and controversy arise when discussing the idea of choral blend. Many common approaches to achieve this blend often cause singers to modify their vocal technique, which can result in many vocal issues, and lead to fatigue. This paper will explore some common approaches to achieving this sound that allows singers to maintain healthy and natural vocal production. Different approaches in the choral rehearsal and more conversations in each student’s solo study will help to work towards a more healthy approach to singing in both contexts.

First, we must break down the taboo surrounding the term *blend*, which is often associated with choral singing. In the past, this term has typically evoked a negative reaction from solo singers and teachers, as they see it as singers sacrificing their solo vocal timbre to blend with a group. This does not have to be true, however, and although that result is common, it is rarely the goal of a choral ensemble.

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Olsen, *The Solo Singer in the Choral Setting* (United Kingdom: The Scarecrow Press, Inc, 2010), xvi.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Miller, "The Solo Singer in the Choral Ensemble." *The Choral Journal* 35, no. 8 (1995), 2.

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Perhaps a better term to describe the choral aesthetic would be *balanced*. As Miller says in his article on choral singing:

Balancing voices is far better choral technique than is the unrealizable goal of trying to blend them. A complete choral sound can be achieved only when the singers within the ensemble use their voices efficiently, using a vocal production based on good breath management, free laryngeal action, and flexible resonator track adjustment.<sup>3</sup>

This idea promotes healthy solo singing in choral ensembles. Usually, this is the goal of choral conductors, but often the language used in choral settings can cause singers to add unnecessary strain. For example, when asked to ‘blend’ with the singers around them, some singers may feel the need to diffuse or push their tone in order to compensate or match the singers next to them. This is especially dangerous considering each singer comes from very different levels of training and some voices will be much more developed than others. In the words of Peterson, “The choir director has two choices – either to subdue the trained voices to blend with the others, or, develop the untrained singers to a higher degree of performance to blend with the solo voices. No doubt, we all agree to the latter plan.”<sup>4</sup> To achieve this though, conductors must be familiar with their singers. As James M. Jordan suggests in his article titled *False Blend*, conductors must take the time to become familiar with each individual voice in their choir.<sup>5</sup> This will allow them to use the following approaches to create the optimal space for each singer to sing fully and healthily.

The first step to ensuring healthy and natural tone production is to place the singers properly. As suggested above, the vast majority of issues soloists have in choral ensembles come from listening to the singers around them. Each voice is unique, and often singers find difficulty in singing with or next to certain voices that clash with their own. This idea is summed up well by James Jordan and Michele Holt in their book *The School Choral Program*:

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<sup>3</sup> Miller, “The Solo Singer in the Choral Ensemble.”, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Paul W. Peterson, “Problems of Choral Blend.” *The NATS Bulletin* 8 (1952), 2.

<sup>5</sup> James M. Jordan, “False Blend: A Vocal Pedagogy Problem for the Choral Conductor.” *The Choral Journal* 24, no. 10 (1984), 25.

Each voice possesses its own unique overtone series, which defines its own special timbre. That overtone series can be likened to various types of combs. Some combs have larger teeth that are more widely spaced; others have teeth that are narrower and spaced closer together. A comb with wider-spaced teeth will fit together with a comb that has more narrowly spaced teeth. The goal is to get two combs that fit together with complementary teeth. The teeth are representative of the overtones in each voice. You want singers sitting adjacent to each other whose overtone series are complementary or interlocking. When this is accomplished, a natural blend is elicited from singers that does not require them to compromise their vocal technique and allows for the best intonation possible.<sup>6</sup>

The typical way of achieving this placement is by having the singers in each section sing a short segment on a vowel of the conductor's choice. This segment could be a simple scale or melody line from a well-known song. Having everyone sing the same thing will allow the conductor to hear the similarities and differences in each singer's vocal timbre and weight<sup>7</sup>. They can then begin to 'match' singers, and place them next to different voices to see where each fits best. The conductor will typically choose a singer to begin the exercise that matches the ideal sound they want from that section. For example, if the conductor desires a rounder or darker colour then they would begin with that voice type. They would then proceed to hear each singer in that section sing next to the starting singer. Encouraging the singers to not blend with each other is very important; the goal is to have each singer singing with a healthy, supported, free and vibrant sound.<sup>8</sup> From there the conductor slowly builds a formation where each singer fits with the singers on either side of them. The process is often compared to putting together a puzzle, and is typically thought of as long and tedious, but it is incredibly important, especially when working with singers with developing voices. This process should ideally happen in the early weeks of rehearsals, to ensure that singers are comfortable and able to sing freely in each rehearsal.

Arranging the choir in the above way is a popular and smart approach to solving many issues of choral blend, but some issues may still arise. The next important element in a unified choral sound is diction. There is almost unanimous agreement among choral conductors that one of the most important

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<sup>6</sup> Michele Holt, James Jordan, *The School Choral Program* (Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc, 2008), 164-170.

<sup>7</sup> Brenda Smith and Robert T. Sataloff, *Choral Pedagogy: Third Edition* (San Diego: Plural Publishing Inc, 2013), 242-245.

<sup>8</sup> Holt and Jordan, *The School Choral Program*, 166-167.

factors in the achievement of choral blend is unity of vowel.<sup>9</sup> Coleman states in his book *Choral Technique and Interpretation*, "...blend is largely dependent upon the exact uniformity in the shape of vowels. Not that one particular vowel-shape is right and another wrong, but there must be a standard."<sup>10</sup> When working to achieve this, the first step is to decide on what vowel sound is desired. Each vowel has many shadings of pronunciation, so there is no one correct pronunciation. Typically the vowel colour would be chosen based on the dramatic requirements inherent in the music.<sup>11</sup> Other important factors conductors should consider when choosing vowel shape is the tessitura where each choir is singing. The conductor must then demonstrate to the choir the desired vowel sound and shape. This approach is described by Wyatt in his article "Blend in Choral Sound":

The production of the vowel by a choir is dependent upon the mental conception of the vowel on the part of the director. He must determine the color and shade of the vowel that fits the particular mood or expressive content of the music. It is the uniformity of the vowel on the part of all members of the choir that determines the tone color or quality.<sup>12</sup>

Smith and Sataloff in their book on *Choral Pedagogy* suggest having the choir sing a unison melody on each vowel, and encourage singers to listen to one another and try to match the vowel shape of the singers around them. From there they suggest singing the same melody in canon, so that singers can get used to matching vowel timbre across different pitches.<sup>13</sup> Challenges can often arise when conductors ask their singers to listen to the singers around them and 'match' their vowel. As explained previously, this can sometimes cause singers to unhealthily alter their tone in order to match the tone and volume of those around them. Each singer has a unique voice quality, and singers should never feel they need to strain their voice to match someone else's.<sup>14</sup> It is important for conductors to continually promote singers to sing with healthy natural tone production while altering the shape of the vowel. In his paper "Balance or Blend", Smith explains this:

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<sup>9</sup> Larry Wyatt, "Blend in Choral Sound" *The Choral Journal*, Vol. 8 (1967), 15.

<sup>10</sup> Henry Coleman, *Choral Technique and Interpretation* (London: London University Press, 1932), 57.

<sup>11</sup> Wyatt, "Blend in Choral Sound", 16-17.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>13</sup> Smith and Sataloff, *Choral Pedagogy: Third Edition*, 241.

<sup>14</sup> Perry Smith, "Balance or Blend? Two Approaches to Choral Singing" *The Choral Journal* 43, no. 5 (2002), 40.

Singers have the ability to alter their resonance chambers' shape and size (mouth and pharynx) as well as the shape and thickness of the sound maker or vibrator (the vocal folds) even during the act of singing. Resonance chambers can be enlarged or made smaller, and the possible variations of shapes, and sounds, are innumerable... The concept of lip position is crucial to this ability, as well as the degree openness of the jaw. Vowel modification must be well understood by any director<sup>15</sup>

With that though, each singer perceives vowel modification differently, so once each singer has mastered how to best adjust their vowel to match the conductor's example then a blended vowel sound can be achieved. If a singer is having difficulty placing the vowel without strain then they should discuss it with their solo teacher. Vowel shape and modification is something commonly discussed in solo studio, and the techniques used there should not be any different than those used in a choral rehearsal.

A unique challenge choral singing often brings to the solo singer is the inability to fully hear oneself. In studio singers can hear their voice and are focused on technique. In choir singers will often be more focused on sight-reading, count singing, phrasing, and the uniform production of vowels, rather than their vocal production. This may cause singers to not apply the proper technique that they work on in studio, which can result in faster fatigue. The inability to hear one's voice may also cause the singer to push their voice, or support with their throat rather than abdominal muscles.<sup>16</sup> This will not only cause fatigue sooner, but also instill bad habits that may be challenging to reverse. This is a unique issue, as the effects often worsen when singers are asked to sing soloistically.<sup>17</sup> This choral phenomenon is known as the Lombard effect, an acoustic event that is described as singers increasing their volume in response to auditory feedback in the choral environment.<sup>18</sup> When singing soloistically, or with one's full voice, there is a tendency to over sing, as the frequencies around each singer become more intense. One possible solution to the Lombard effect is spacing the choristers further apart. When singers have more space on

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<sup>15</sup> Smith, "Balance or Blend? Two Approaches to Choral Singing", 40-41.

<sup>16</sup> Olsen, *The Solo Singer in the Choral Setting*, 25-27.

<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Ekholm, "The Effect of Singing Mode and Seating Arrangement on Choral Blend and Overall Choral Sound." *Journal of Research in Music Education* 48, no. 2 (2000), 133.

<sup>18</sup> Olsen, *The Solo Singer in the Choral Setting*, 144.

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either side of them they can often hear themselves better.<sup>19</sup> Olsen discusses another solution though, known as the concept of ‘Singing by sensation’. In her words; “Singing by sensation is the act of utilizing muscle memory, practice habits, and resonant sensations to sustain a healthy technique when auditory feedback is not available.”<sup>20</sup> This concept is also important for solo singing, as it assists singers when first singing in a new acoustic. Singers must be adaptable to singing in different acoustics; our voices sound very different in a practice room than they do in a church or large theatre. Therefore, it is important for singers to learn to trust the muscle memory that they have learned in practice and studio<sup>21</sup>, as it will assist healthy vocal production in both the choral and solo setting.

Solo singing and choral singing are two different art forms that both demand healthy vocal production. The approaches and challenges explored in this paper are all ways that can enhance the choral experience for solo singers. They will not solve every problem, however, and singers will have to continually work to be aware of their instrument and how they might be modifying their voice in choir. Going forward, the best way to combat issues a singer has in choir is to discuss them with both their conductor and solo teacher. Having an open dialogue between students, voice faculty, and choral faculty about maintaining healthy tone production will benefit all parties involved. It is important for conductors to know what is causing solo singers difficulty in rehearsals, so they can adjust and improve their lesson plan to benefit their singers. It is also equally important for voice teachers to be encouraging their singer to use the same healthy technique in choir as they do in studio, and to ensure they are aware of the risks that can come from pushing or diffusing their tone. Although the choral goal of achieving a unified sound may seem limiting, it should not stop singers from singing with their natural voice. As James Jordan says, “Blend in combination with healthy vocal tone is one of the most exciting areas of our art.”<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Ekholm, "The Effect of Singing Mode and Seating Arrangement on Choral Blend and Overall Choral Sound.", 133.

<sup>20</sup> Olsen, *The Solo Singer in the Choral Setting*, 144.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 145.

<sup>22</sup> Jordan, "False Blend: A Vocal Pedagogy Problem for the Choral Conductor.", 26.

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