

Finding
Your

Teacher
Voice

A guide to choral pedagogy with practical strategies
for every classroom and choir

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Introduction

My path through being a music educator has been one full of unusual twists and turns. Over the course of the 18 years since I graduated with my Bachelor of Music in Music Education and Vocal Performance, I have worked as an elementary general music and chorus teacher, a high school chorus and theater teacher, an adjunct professor, a studio singer, a music editor and engraver, a writer, a composer, a conductor, and a choral clinician. I've taught music in the public schools to children as young as four, and to adults in a community setting. I also stepped away from music and music education entirely for several years, after my oldest son was diagnosed with a chronic illness at age one.

It's been a tremendous adventure, filled with both challenges and opportunities I never could have predicted. More than once I have found myself saying, "Well, I never pictured myself doing this, but here goes!" And perhaps, it is in that spirit that I found myself writing this book, which is intended as a practical resource for music teachers already out in the field. I wanted to offer a solution-oriented guide to the myriad everyday problems that teachers face as they enter the world of choral and general music education.

This book is organized into three sections, Prelude, Intermezzo, and Chorale. (I named these after the three levels of choirs in the Ithaca Children and Youth Chorus, where I am proud to be the Artistic Director.) The first section, Prelude, is centered in vocal pedagogy, and offers a number of flexible exercises that can be adapted for use in warmups, small group lessons, or regular class instruction.

The second section, Intermezzo, looks at skill acquisition and teaching methods, and offers many specific tactics designed to improve the efficiency and efficacy of your classroom and choral instruction. Once again, many of the exercises listed can be directly incorporated into a lesson or rehearsal plan.

The third section, Chorale, is largely philosophical, and looks at some of the larger questions teachers face as they examine their teaching over the long term. It's here that I reveal most of my heart as a music educator, including some of the biggest lessons I have learned through the course of my career.

Acknowledgements

The beauty of teaching is that every teacher carries the wisdom of those that came before them: I am a product of the many teachers who taught me, and the many teachers I have taught alongside over the years. The debt of gratitude I owe to these people is so deep that I doubt it can ever be paid back; it's left to me to pay it forward.

My own childhood music teachers, who later became my professional colleagues at JCHS, have never ceased to be my mentors and greatest inspirations: Ken Turner and Michael Carbone, thank you for giving me so many wonderful opportunities to grow as a band geek. Jerry Bachman, you were the first person to ever suggest I might have a future as a music educator. Andy Beck, you were the teacher who helped me rediscover my singing voice, and who has served as my most constant mentor and guide through multiple phases of my career as a professional musician. I am so thankful!

My instructors at Ithaca College gave me a profound foundation that has formed the basis of my music education philosophy and practice: Dr. Verna Brummet and Nancy Tittlebaugh Riley shaped my love of the craft of teaching; Dr. John White and Dr. Craig Cummings ignited my twin interests in music theory and aural skills; and perhaps most substantively, Dr. Janet Galván served not only as an inspirational role model as a groundbreaking conductor and educator, she also offered me the chance to take over for her as Artistic Director of the Ithaca Children and Youth Chorus. Furthermore, Dr. Galván served as my advisor for an independent study in choral pedagogy, during which I first developed and discovered many of the ideas in this book.

Special thanks also go out to the faculty of Ithaca College's Music Theory, History, and Composition department, especially chair Dr. Tim Johnson, as well as Dr. Deborah Rifkin, Dr. Crystal Peebles, and Merilee Nord, who have provided me tremendous amounts of guidance and assistance as I've grown into the role of being a collegiate instructor.

My colleagues at the Ithaca Children and Youth Chorus, Emily Richards and Sarah Smokay Linfors, are a constant source of inspiration and innovation. I am so proud of the work we do together!

To my students at Ithaca College, especially those who took the time to read early chapter drafts and offer feedback, know that you are the ones that continually reignite my love of teaching. I have found such joy in watching you grow into tomorrow's leaders in the field. I hope you find these ideas useful as you begin your own careers.

My last and greatest acknowledgements go to my family and close friends, who have supported me through the last five years as I have reorganized and revitalized my career. Jeremy Knapp, you have been the perfect partner and stepfather through many days of writing, planning, and rehearsals. To my children, Richard and Madeline: you are at the very heart of all I do, and every day you inspire me to be the best version of myself. Mom, Mike, and John, you never stopped having faith in me, even when I struggled. And to the wonderful and zany crew of friends and adoptive family I've found in Hector, NY: thank you for being my listening ears and cheerleaders through this strange and wonderful ride.

The Body Builds the Voice

Posture & Breathing

Setting up for success

Because a singer's body is quite literally the singer's instrument, we begin our exploration of the voice by properly putting the instrument together. In other words, everything starts with proper posture. Just as you wouldn't kink the tubing of a trumpet, a body needs to be correctly aligned so singers can make their best sounds. That means it's important to remember breathing and posture when we are preparing to sing—every time.

Any of the following exercises can be incorporated into warmups for lessons or rehearsals. I especially like establishing some of these as warmup routines at the beginning of the year, so that we get into the habit of priming our bodies (and minds) for singing at the beginning of each rehearsal.



Aligning the Spine

Any age

Set up for good singing posture

1. Have students stand far enough apart that they can stretch their arms out without hitting their neighbors. In this position, do each of the following movements as a class.
2. Drop the chin forward and roll the head gently from side to side, never rolling past the shoulder. Do not roll the neck back, as this can result in injury.
3. Roll both the shoulders back in gentle circles several times, then reverse direction and roll them forward.
4. Extend the arms out to the sides fully and flex the palms as though you are pushing out inside a doorway. Make small circles with your arm, slowly increasing in size until you are tracing about the size of a large serving platter (like a deli tray). Reverse direction, and gradually get smaller until the arms are still. Drop hands to sides.
5. Make sure feet are a little more than shoulder width apart. Place the right hand on the abdomen to keep your torso tall, then reach the left hand up and over the head, leaning the torso slightly to the right and feeling the stretch across the side of the body. Hold for a few seconds, then return to a neutral position. Stretch a second time, and see if you can go a little deeper. Repeat two times on the other side, with the left hand on the abdomen and the right hand reaching over the head.
6. With the feet a little more than shoulder width apart, bend over at the waist. Let the head hang heavy and slowly stack each vertebra on top of the previous one, letting the neck and head come up last. At the end of this, the head should be balanced atop the neck, and shoulders should be aligned with hips, knees and ankles. You may find students need to tuck the tailbone under slightly to bring the body into alignment.



The Book Balance Test

Grades 4 and up

Promote postural awareness

1. Have students place a large, flat book (or their folders) on their heads. If their posture is aligned properly, the book should balance on top of the head.
2. Mark a straight line on the floor with masking tape and have students walk along the line while balancing the book or folder. Can they keep it balanced even as they move? If possible, have them face a full-length mirror while they walk so they can see what their posture looks like.
3. This activity can also be used for seated posture in rehearsal. If you notice backs are slumping into chairs, have them put their folders on their heads while they hold their music!



Floor Alignment

Any age

Discover proper singing alignment without having to fight gravity

1. Have students find a quiet space on the floor and lie down on their backs. Have them put their hands on their abdomens and encourage them to “breathe into their hands.” Their breath should cause the hand resting on their abdomen to move.
2. Guide them in a brief meditation, asking them to call attention to the alignment of their head over their shoulders, shoulders over hips, hips over knees, knees over ankles. Let them observe the small space beneath the back, where the spine curves naturally. Point out that that curve remains when you stand up.
3. Have students sing a few of your normal warmups or a short section of music while lying on the floor. What do they notice about their breathing? About the way they sound?
4. Have them stand and sing the same warmups or section of music. Encourage them to recreate the same posture that they had while lying horizontally on the ground—now it's vertical. Does it still feel the same? Does it sound the same?



Marionette Posture

Any age, but especially effective for grades PreK–2

Demonstrate postural alignment

1. This is especially effective if you can get your hands on a simple marionette puppet. If you have a marionette, start by making the marionette slouch down and ask, “Do you think she can sing well like this? Why or why not?” Guide them towards an understanding that poor posture causes poor breath support, which results in poor sound.
2. Next, demonstrate the marionette standing up tall. Ask the same question. Again, guide them to an understanding that good posture means good breath support and good sound.
3. Have students stand up in their spots. Ask them to attach an imaginary string to the top of their heads with one hand.
4. Have them pretend that the string has gone slack (like the first example of the marionette), and then have them sing a few phrases. How does it sound?
5. Have them tighten their imaginary string so it pulls the head and spine tall, lifting the chest. Have them sing again. How does it sound? How do the two compare?



Positions 1, 2, and 3

Any age, but best for grades PreK–6

Learn proper seated and standing postures

1. Tell students there are only 3 positions they need to know when it comes to singing: positions 1, 2, and 3.
2. Ask them to relax in their chairs. I leave the idea of “relaxed” very open—as long as they’re upright and not sprawled across their neighbor, it’s ok. That’s position 1. Position 1 is for listening to the teacher talk, or when you’re waiting your turn to sing.
3. Next, ask them to sit up tall in their chairs, with their backs away from the back of the chair and with feet flat on the floor. Singers should hold up their folder or music so that they can see both the teacher and the music. This is position 2. Position 2 is for singing while seated.
4. Ask them to stand up, with their weight evenly distributed between both feet, their spine straight and tall, and holding their music up so they can see both the teacher and the music. This is position 3. Position 3 is for singing while standing.
5. Make a game of it by calling out each position in a random order, seeing how quickly students can transition between them without talking. Time them, and don’t stop the timer until all students are correct. Make a note of the time and try to beat it next class.

A better way to breathe

Typically, if you ask kids to take a big breath, what you’ll get is a lot of raised shoulders—and surprisingly, not a lot of air for singing. That’s because lifted shoulders and a puffed-out chest make the body too tense to really take in or use air efficiently. Even though it may sound silly to work on breathing with young singers, a silent, relaxed, and full breath produces a far better singing sound than an audible gasp. Here are a few simple exercises to help students get into better breathing habits.



Filling the Inner Tube

Any age

Experience the sensations associated with correct breathing

If you can get your hands on an inflatable inner tube that fits you (and maybe one that is student-sized, also), bring it out for this exercise: the sillier-looking, the better! Greet students at the door wearing the inner tube, then enter the room and ask students to imagine they are wearing an inner tube like yours.

1. Have them inflate their imaginary inner tube by taking in a silent breath as if they were sipping air through a straw. Ask them to fill the bottom of their lungs first, feeling the expansion all the way around the body. Their shoulders should stay relaxed and down.
2. Next, have them pretend the inner tube has sprung a leak by hissing as the air slowly drains out of the inner tube. See how long students can make their hisses last on a single breath. You can repeat this several times, and count out the hiss in groups of four, gradually increasing the length of the hiss. You can also experiment with the volume or intensity of the hiss for variety’s sake. How long can you sustain a loud hiss? A soft hiss? Which is easier? Why?
3. If you want to give all students the physical sensation of an inner tube, try having each student tie a piece of yarn of an appropriate size semi-snugly around their waist. If they’re breathing correctly, they’ll feel the string push back slightly around their midsection as they breathe in and suspend the air for the hiss.



Bendy Belly Breathing

Grades 4 and up

Experience the sensation of breath expansion around the midsection

1. Have students stand with their feet shoulder-width apart, then have them bend at the waist, leaving their arms, torso, and head to hang heavy.
2. As they're bent at the waist, ask them to take a deep, relaxed breath in, feeling the breath enter and expand all around their abdomen. This feeling will be exaggerated somewhat, because of how the body is folded over on itself. Take several deep, silent inhalations, concentrating on that expanded feeling. This exercise may make some students feel a little dizzy. You may want to have them stand near a chair or wall to steady themselves if they feel lightheaded.
3. If you wish, you can have students sing a little bit in this position, though it will feel very strange to them. Try humming up and down a 5-note scale a few times, concentrating on not collapsing the expanded breath as they begin to sing.



The Overzealous Librarian

Any age

Use the support muscles and practice relaxed, passive inhalation

1. If your students struggle with overzealous breathing marked by overactive, high shoulders, this is a good exercise to help them find a more relaxed inhalation. Tell them that they are the school's newest, very strict librarian, who can't bear to have a sound in the library. They need to have a strong "shh" to keep the library nice and quiet.
2. Have them place their hands on their waists, with their fingers pointed toward the belly button. Have them do a couple quick, loud "shh" sounds to warm up, engaging the abdominal muscles with each one. You can tell them they should be able to feel the "shh" in their hands each time.
3. Next, have them completely rid themselves of all their air in one long, loud "shhhh!" Once they have emptied their lungs, have them silently count to three, then just let their muscles go. The air will rush back in naturally to fill the vacuum they've created. Notice how effortless and relaxed this kind of inhalation is—all one needs to do is relax the support muscles for the air to rush back in.
4. Repeat several times, making sure shoulders stay relaxed and down throughout the exercise.



Motorboats and Raspberries

Any age

Practice using the support muscles

1. Have students place their hands on their waists, with their fingers pointed toward the belly button. Ask them to imitate the sound of a motorboat or blow a raspberry for as long as they can. What happens to those belly muscles?
2. Explain that those muscles are the ones that help control the rate of airflow. This motorboat/raspberry sound requires even more air than regular singing, so it's a way to exercise and strengthen the support muscles. These sounds are technically called lip trills.
3. Ask students to lip trill on a five-note scale, ascending then descending. Have them continue to keep their hands on their waists to feel the sensation of the muscles engaging. Repeat and move up and down the scale.



Straw Phonation

Any age

Balance breath pressure

1. For this exercise you'll need a drinking straw for each student. Have students take the straw and place it between their lips, making a tight seal around the edge of the straw. Have them make a siren sound from their lowest pitch to their highest pitch through the straw. Repeat several times, trying to increase the size of the siren slightly each time.
2. Next, have them sing octave arpeggios (*do-mi-sol-do-sol-mi-do*) through the straw.
3. Finally, have singers sing any repertoire you're currently working on through the straw. This is especially good for sections that singers find challenging, such as extended passages of high singing, or those that require long breaths. This exercise is popular with many professional singers, including Renée Fleming.

Sample

CHAPTER 2

Finding the Fun in Phonation

Exploring Vocal Play

What is vocal play?

The voice, as an instrument, poses some unusual challenges. You can't take it out and look at it. You can't switch out reeds, mouthpieces, or bows. You can't send it to the repair shop to fix bent keys or put new pads on it. Literally every single voice you encounter will be unique in terms of range, tessitura, and timbre, unlike the fleet of Yamaha® trumpets that sit in the band room.

You, as a teacher of this most unusual instrument, must become quite creative in helping your learners explore and get to know their voices. How on earth will you do this? Enter vocal play.

In babies just learning to talk, vocal play encompasses all the activities that come before actual, meaningful speech: babbling, blowing raspberries, imitating animal sounds or firetrucks, etc. For singers, it's almost exactly the same thing: exploration of all the ways that the voice can make sound before using it for beautiful singing. The key word here is *exploration*. Vocal play is not the same thing as singing. It's not meant to be beautiful, or even especially dignified. It's about testing the limits, experimenting, and finding ways to get around some of the unconscious mental and physical blocks that singers commonly experience.

The set-up

What you get out of vocal play often depends on how you, the teacher, frame it for your students. It can be informative, revelatory, joyous, or downright chaotic. In all cases, productive vocal play involves the following three elements.

1. **It is purposeful.** You are attempting to access a different aspect or quality of the voice, so what is it that you want to explore? A few possible avenues of inquiry could be breath pressure; resonance; brightness; mouth shape; palate placement; use of the tongue, lips, and jaw; register; volume; and tone quality.
2. **There is a clearly defined task.** Give specific instructions to help direct the exploration. Often, using the contrast between extremes is informative. The quality you are seeking likely exists somewhere in the middle, but you (and your students) will find useful information at both ends of the spectrum. A few contrasts worth testing include low/high, front/back, bright/dark, head/chest, engaged/passive, tense/relaxed, breathy/focused, soft/loud, wide/narrow, light/heavy, fast/slow, harsh/gentle, and short/sustained.
3. **It's an experiment.** Here is where mindset matters the most. Some students will dive into vocal play with wild abandon, some will be cautious or afraid of making any mistakes, and some will outright refuse out of desire to maintain their poise or "coolness." (This last group is especially prevalent among middle- and high-schoolers.) Therefore, your classroom culture and your personal willingness to engage and take risks will greatly influence how your students approach vocal play. For young children, a short ritual of miming putting on a lab coat and goggles to become "a vocal researcher" may be enough. For older students, making a list of posted guidelines for "The Vocal Lab" might be more appropriate. A few possible suggestions:

All results in The Vocal Lab are important research data.

The Vocal Lab is a safe, friendly, and respectful place to experiment.

The more deeply I explore, the more I learn.

The best answer is usually in the middle of the extremes.

What we take out of the Lab makes us better, stronger musicians.

Vocal play experiments

What follows are a series of vocal play experiments you can use in your own “Vocal Lab”. They can be used in ensembles, classroom settings, or even voice lessons. If you incorporate a journaling or written element in your classroom, consider having your students fill out one of the “Lab Reports” at the end of this section.



Animals in the Pet Store

Grades PreK–1

Explore contrasting voice qualities by making animal sounds

1. Explain that today in the Vocal Lab your job is to record all the animals in the pet store for their new website. Pet owners want to know how much noise they can expect from their new pets!
2. Split children into two groups. Wave your magic wand and turn each group into one of the animals from a pair listed below.
 - Howling dogs vs. barking dogs (sustained vs. short)
 - Big dogs vs. little dogs (low pitch vs. high pitch)
 - Snakes vs. kittens (no pitch vs. pitch)
 - Bunnies vs. parrots (silence vs. sound)
 - Crows vs. canaries (harsh vs. gentle)
3. Let each group take a turn making their noises for a few seconds by holding up your magic wand “microphone” to the group. Explain they can only make their animal noises when your magic wand is held in front of their group, or—*poof!*—they turn back into quiet children who will have to wait a turn to come back and play.
4. After each group has had a turn, have groups switch and try the other animal, so they get to experience both ends of the sound spectrum for each pair.
5. When both groups have gone, ask questions about the contrast: “Which animal made short sounds? Which one made long, stretched-out sounds?” Then, move on to the next grouping. Repeat with as many pairs as desired, or make up your own!



Sirens

Any age

Explore the full pitch spectrum of the singing voice

1. With students standing up, or sitting in a singing posture, take your hand and draw a curve in the air while sustaining an “oo” vowel, moving from low pitch to high pitch and back down again.
2. Ask your students to follow along and try it. Chances are, they will stick to a mid-range siren. Ask them to go both lower and higher and try again, this time exaggerating the drawing of the curve farther in both directions.
3. Keep in mind these tips for success.

Encourage students to keep their lips rounded into a lovely “oo” shape, and to keep the insides of their mouths rounded as well.

Keep vowels tall, not wide—there may be a tendency to pull the lips back to achieve higher pitch. You can have students gently place their index fingers on the corners of their lips as they siren to help them remember to keep vowels tall.

Once you have a beautiful, consistent “oo” siren, experiment with other vowels like “ee” as in beep, “ah” as in saw, “ay” as in say, and “oh” as in snow.

You can also experiment with dynamics. What changes when your siren is especially soft or especially loud?

Young children may enjoy trying this exercise with a picture of a roller coaster drawn on the board. Don't be afraid to make it wild. They will love it! You can even have one of the students draw the coaster, or have them each draw their own and have the class take turns trying sirens on each child's coaster.



This Is My Voice

Grades PreK–5

Explore different uses of the voice, with and without pitch

- From either a standing position or a seated singing posture, have students echo you saying each of the following phrases:
 - “This is my speaking voice.” (normal volume)
 - “This is my outdoor voice.” (louder, almost shouting)
 - “This is my whispering voice.” (whispered)
- Finish with “This is my singing voice” performed as follows.



This is my sing - ing voice.

You can accompany this with Curwen hand signs for *sol* and *mi* to reinforce solfège concepts. Invent additional phrases to say if you like.



Alien Vowels

Grades 3 and up

Experiment with resonance by shifting between bright and dark vowels

- Start by having your singers sing a sustained “oo” vowel on a comfortable pitch.
- Cut them off, then explain that you’re going to ask them to make the sound darker and more hollow-sounding. They can do this by dropping the jaw to make more space inside their mouths and exaggerating the rounded lips for the “oo.” Demonstrate, then have them try the darkest “oo” they can sing on the same pitch.
- Cut them off again, then explain that now they’re going to sing a bright, brilliant “oo.” They can do this by raising the jaw to make a little less space, and imagining the “oo” buzzing on the front of the lips instead of inside the mouth. Demonstrate, then have them try the brightest “oo” they can sing on the same pitch as before.
- Next, have them sustain the “oo” while moving from their medium tone to the darkest and back again. Repeat for the bright “oo.” Use one of your arms like a needle to show where they are on the spectrum. Ask how the two extremes feel different to sing. Ask them to sing their best, most beautiful “oo.”
- Try the same exercise with “ee.” This vowel can be made darker by dropping the jaw, and brighter by bringing the sound forward to the front of the face. They can get the brightest sound by spreading the lips wide—this might be interesting for the sake of the experiment, but it’s not generally a pleasant sound! Again, ask how the two extremes feel different, and find their perfect “ee.”

6. Lastly, try moving between “oo” and “ee” while holding the same pitch. Keep the lips rounded for the “oo” and gently relax them while moving to the “ee.” Let students move freely back and forth between vowels at their own pace. What do you notice about the sound? How does it feel?
7. For an additional challenge, have one group sing on a D while another group sings on an A. You’ll likely hear some overtones pop out!

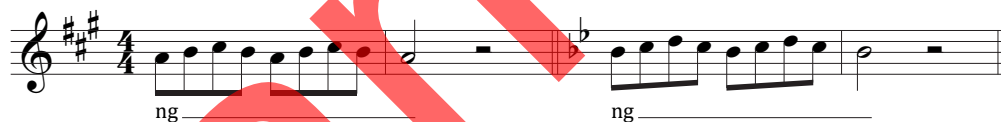


Bumblebees, Mosquitos, and Hummingbirds

Any age

Explore forward placement and vocal resonance

1. Have students pinch an index finger and thumb together and hold it in front of their face. This will become their insect.
2. Using a sustained “bzz” sound, have students fly their bumblebee up and down in front of their face while changing pitch. How does it feel? Where do you feel sensation?
3. Try buzzing up and down again, this time while pinching the nose. How does it feel? Where do you feel sensation? How is it different from the first way you tried it?
4. Pinch the thumb and finger together again—now it’s a mosquito. Using a sustained “ng” sound (like at the end of the word sing), have students fly their mosquito up and down while changing pitch. The mouth should stay open while singing. Ask them to describe how it feels. Where do you feel sensation? How is it different than the buzz of the bumblebee? Do you find you can go higher or lower with the mosquito than you could with the bumblebee?
5. Sing the “ng” sound on pitches as follows, heading up the scale by half-steps.



6. Pinch the thumb and index finger together again—now it’s a hummingbird. Hum up and down on an “mm” with the mouth closed while moving the hummingbird up and down. Try humming with teeth touching each other and without teeth touching each other. How do they feel different? Does one feel more tense than the other?
7. Add defined pitch to the hum (with teeth not touching) and slide between pitches as follows, moving down the scale by half steps:



8. Ask students: How did the sensation change as you changed pitch?

Taking time for reflection

As I've stated before, the real benefit in vocal play is in letting students experiment with their voices. You can maximize this effect by having them reflect (verbally or in writing) on what they learned about their voices during each experiment. Encouraging and engaging their curiosity is the best tool you have for helping them find the very best version of their voice without judgment or fear.

Below you can find a suggested format for a "Lab Report," which allows students to record their observations. If you use a voice journal or other written format regularly in class, this can be easily integrated into that.

Vocal Lab Report

Name: _____ Date: _____

Experiment Title: _____

Observations: _____

One thing I found interesting about this experiment was: _____

One thing I learned about my voice today was: _____

Sample