Advancing The Status Of The Treble Ensemble: Choral Educators’ Views On The Status Of Treble Choral Ensembles

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Abstract: Perhaps one of the greatest challenges for secondary choral directors is to build a vocally balanced ensemble of students who have the desire to sing. Because a shift has occurred away from the popularity of male singing that dominated the early years of America, the desire to obtain nearly even numbers between the genders may mean that many girls who are able and eager may be placed in treble choirs or not included at all in order to counteract the low numbers of boys. I explored the restructuring of three choral programs in which the status of the treble ensembles had recently been elevated. While this could be considered a matter of having the appropriate voicing for a choral ensemble, it may truly be an issue with gender discrimination at its root as sections are almost always divided along gender lines. Educators must not simply rely on tradition or bow to student, parent and perhaps even community expectations, but always consider what is educationally beneficial for their students.
Perhaps one of the greatest challenges for secondary choral directors is to build a vocally balanced ensemble of students who have the desire to sing (Tipps, 2003). According to J. Terry Gates (1989), high school choirs changed from being equally divided between the genders in the 1930s to having a heavy preponderance of females (greater than a 5:2 ratio) 50 years later. A shift has occurred away from the popularity of male singing that dominated the early years of America.

In order to achieve balance between the sections in a choral ensemble, which in turn requires nearly equal numbers of males and females, many girls who are trained and interested may be placed in treble choirs or not included at all in order to counteract the low numbers of boys. To make matters worse, the status of the high school treble clef ensemble is often viewed as inferior to the mixed ensemble. According to Patricia O'Toole (1998), some of the issues leading to this viewpoint include a lack of diverse historically based literature for treble ensembles, more opportunities for touring and competitions for mixed choirs, and the tendency for the mixed ensemble to be featured by having them perform last on a concert.

Delores Gauthier (2005) surveyed members of Western Michigan University’s choral ensembles concerning the image of women’s choirs. Ninety percent of females reported a preference to sing in a mixed choir, pointing to a perception that it received more respect than the women’s choir. Subjects also shared a preference to simply be with males and an appreciation for the resulting depth in the choral sound. A wider variety of music and a perceived increase in challenge were also mentioned as reasons for their choice.

Randi Carp (2004) surveyed a group of 127 teachers to examine their views on single-gender ensembles. Teachers claimed they traditionally viewed boys’ and girls’ choirs as “training grounds” for singing in a mixed ensemble. All respondents directed mixed choirs and 91% had women’s choirs, but only 46% sponsored a male ensemble. Carp explained that the mixed choir is, in many cases, the only prospect for males while females must audition for the same opportunity. Not only do males get to sing in the top choral ensembles, they receive an abundance of encouragement each step of the way. By the time males become high school singers, they more likely to be met with nothing but encouragement from teachers in an effort to mask chastisement from peers.

**Restructuring**

I had the opportunity to interview the choral directors at three high schools who had recently restructured their choral programs to include an auditioned treble (female) choir. In each case, the treble choir was still second to the auditioned mixed choir, but all considered the new hierarchy a success. Pseudonyms will be used in order to maintain confidentiality.

The head director at a 4A high school (the classification of the largest schools) in the southwestern part of the state explained the impetus behind the change in the show choir program at his school: He simply had girls whose dance experience far outweighed that of the boys. His goal was to give the girls a group of their own in order to provide them with an opportunity to perform more difficult choreography and music without being hindered by the boys’ inexperience. He realized that in the curricular choirs (ensembles that meet during the school day and for which students receive a grade) at his school this was not the case; the boys were working with more experienced girls almost immediately. The director offered his view that the girls should not be limited by the lack of freshmen boys’ ability, but went on to admit that he believed singing with more mature girls helped to keep the boys focused. With the new structure in place, he felt like the program best accommodated the development of the singers.

The restructuring initially met with resistance. The director observed that the singers became distressed if they were not selected for the mixed choir. He explained this by saying, “They feel like it’s stepping back, a ‘slap in the face,’ to have to sing in a treble choir again after being in a mixed ensemble.” Then added, “We’re doing everything we can to make sure everyone feels like they have a place to actually feel like part of the group” (Wilson, 2012, NP). He mentioned that, in his observation, it was usually the girls who felt like their role wasn’t as important. He believed the shift was necessary as it provided the best way for them to have a successful experience in high school.

The choral program at a class 3A high school in the northwestern part of the state had also recently
been restructured to create a select ensemble for female singers. The change occurred in response to what the choral educator saw as a need to challenge the female singers in the program beyond what they would be able to do with young, and often inexperienced, male singers. The idea for the group also grew out of a need for balanced mixed ensembles. One of the co-directors realized that the ratio of males to females auditioning for the Chamber Choir was going to be 1 male for every 4.5 females. There were six times as many girls participating in choir as freshmen than boys. The number of male singers available determined the number of students that participated in the top ensemble.

The existing treble ensemble had previously occupied the spot below the junior varsity mixed ensemble in the choral hierarchy at the school. The director based his decisions on the needs of his female singers, recognizing that they greatly outnumbered the boys and desired to be a part of a quality ensemble. He believed these girls needed a place to be where they did not feel like the “leftovers” and could be challenged without the impediment of less-mature males (Wilson, 2012, NP). In his estimation, the girls were not thriving and getting what they needed in that mixed, non-select ensemble. The sound simply was not as good when he had to also deal with inexperienced boys’ voices.

The director believed that moving the treble ensemble to a higher position in the department’s ensemble hierarchy had been a positive alteration. Other students in the choral department were already starting to take notice; younger girls were impressed by the group’s performance and encouraged by the current singers to be a part of it (Wilson, 2012, NP).

The head choral director at a 4A high school in the northwestern part of the state also recalled a lack of acceptance of the auditioned treble ensemble when it was new, but saw student views change quickly. The group’s size actually doubled in its second year. He believed this growth might have been related to increased prominence of the ensemble in the choral hierarchy at the school. In other words, the girls no longer saw themselves at the bottom of the pecking order. The treble ensemble also gained the respect of concert audiences. Rather than feeling as though they were being compared to the mixed choir, they felt like a different type of ensemble. They were not second best, but a unique group. The conductor considered the new treble choir to be one of his most impressive ensembles.

The Varsity Women’s singers are like sponges. They constantly want to learn. They made a name for themselves at madrigal last year. This year, I heard parents saying they couldn’t believe that’s a women’s group. They didn’t give them credit. Now it’s changed into something that can be beneficial for them and I think they enjoy it! (Wilson, 2012, NP)

According to the director, all ensembles in this program perform on the same contests, trips, and concerts. When asked if the new structure was the most ideal for the program, he expressed a desire to have a separate all-male ensemble as well. Unfortunately, he did not see that as a possibility in the near future (Wilson, 2012, NP).

Summary And Closing
Further research is needed to determine the effects of making treble ensembles more select. Patricia O’Toole’s (1998) proposal that the most select ensemble in the program be a treble choir had not been accepted at the schools I visited, but the possible positive effects of moving the treble ensembles into a more honored position within the choral program hierarchy were evident. Recognition of performance success seemed to play a role in boosting the pride and confidence of the ensemble members. Offering treble choir members the same opportunities as the mixed choirs in regards to performance and travel may also contribute.

It is hoped that choral educators who have traditionally placed a majority of their focus on keeping males in their choral ensembles will not neglect their female singers in the process. Educators must not simply rely on tradition or bow to student, parent and perhaps even community expectations, but always consider what is educationally beneficial for their students. While this could be considered a matter of having the appropriate instrumentation for a choral ensemble, it may truly be an issue with gender discrimination at its root as sections are almost always divided along gender lines. Our young women deserve to be treated as the talented and worthy musicians they are.
References


