Voice building for community choirs at *Comunicantus: Choral Laboratory* of the Music Department of the University of São Paulo

Caiti Hauck-Silva, Marco Antonio da Silva Ramos and Susana Cecília Igayara

University of São Paulo, Brazil

Abstract

This paper describes the results of a Master's research focused on voice building activities done at *Comunicantus: Choral Laboratory* of the Music Department of the University of São Paulo, in Brazil. The research aimed to identify and describe elements related, first, to the training of the voice builder, and second, to the strategies used to develop vocal technique in the community choirs Escola and Oficina. In this paper, we will focus on the training of the voice builder. Data were collected through participation in rehearsals of these choirs in 2010 and through analysis of *Comunicantus: Choral Laboratory*'s protocol documentation. The methodology used was action research. Results suggest that voice building is a complex activity, which involves not only the application of vocal exercises, but knowledge on pedagogy and, mainly, the ability of vocal perception.

Keywords: Voice Building for Choirs, Choral Conducting, Vocal Technique, Vocal Perception, Vocal Pedagogy

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Choral singing, in many countries including Brazil, is mostly done by amateur groups. In these choirs, the conductor is generally the only one who has had any specialised musical education and many choristers rely on the choir rehearsal as their only source for learning vocal technique (Ehmann & Haasemann, 1982; Herr, 1995; Pfautsch, 1988; Smith & Sataloff, 2006). In Brazil, many people who sing in amateur choirs have never had any previous musical or vocal training. Martha Herr, a solo singer, conductor and teacher at a Brazilian University, explains that in choral auditions "it is very common to find applicants who not only have never sung in choirs, but who say they have never sung in any situation" (Herr, 1995, p. 52). Choral conductors, therefore, act frequently as voice teachers in the rehearsal. An opportune moment for teaching and learning vocal technique in choral rehearsals is the warm-up period, during which the conductor can address different aspects of vocal technique, such as posture, breathing and resonance. This is what we understand as voice building: the warm-up period which aims to provide the teaching and learning of the foundations of an efficient and healthy vocal technique in the choral setting.

With this reality and ideas as background, the Master's research presented here (Hauck-Silva, 2012) investigated voice building activities done at *Comunicantus: Choral Laboratory* of the Music Department of the School of Communication and Arts of the University of São Paulo (ECA-USP). *Comunicantus: Choral Laboratory* offers undergraduate and graduate students in Music supervised training as conductors, voice builders, arrangers, pianists, and other functions related to the choral activity. The training includes a weekly planning lesson and a weekly rehearsal with one

(or more) of the community choirs, which are groups that don't require previous musical or vocal training for participation. In 2010, the year on which data for this research were collected, *Comunicantus: Choral Laboratory* had three community choirs: the adult choirs Escola and Oficina and the Third Age Choir.

All activities developed at *Comunicantus: Choral Laboratory* are based on the concept of Choir-School, which was developed by its director, Professor Marco Antonio da Silva Ramos. This concept means the choir is a school that offers learning opportunities not only for choristers, but also for the music students, which can develop knowledge and skills for working with choirs formed by untrained people. As Ramos (2003) explains, the concept of Choir-School was conceived

> as a space where education and performance are inextricably linked; where every action is educative; where artistic quality is primary goal, but it is also educational goal; where lessons are not separate from musical learning and training; where rehearsals are lessons; where performances are lessons; where lessons are mixed in depth with the artistic activity as such. (Ramos, 2003, p. 10)

The combination of artistic and educational goals is connected to the idea of association between theory and practice and between academic research and musical performance. This happens, on the one hand, through a weekly rehearsal plan and evaluation report that students write in turn, stimulating reflection on aspects of choral practice (rehearsal strategies, repertoire selection, etc.) and on educational activities (teaching and learning of vocal technique, for example). On the other hand, through these plans and evaluation reports, rehearsals are registered week after week, forming what we call the *Comunicantus: Choral Laboratory*'s protocol documentation, which is

nowadays a source for undergraduate and graduate research. This documentation was one of the sources used to collect data for this research, as it will be explained in the following section.

Aims and methodology

This research focused on voice building activities done with the community choirs Escola and Oficina and aimed to identify and describe: 1) knowledge and skills that are part of the training of the voice builder at *Comunicantus: Choral Laboratory*; 2) the main vocal characteristics of choristers in choirs Escola and Oficina; and 3) the most used exercises in voice building activities within these groups, analysing and discussing them by a confrontation with the literature on choral conducting, choral singing and vocal pedagogy.

Data were collected in rehearsals and in activities related to choirs Escola and Oficina, as well as on *Comunicantus: Choral Laboratory*'s protocol documentation. Rehearsal data were collected in 2010 through direct actions with these two choirs, i.e., through work of the first author as voice builder and conductor of selected pieces. Performances of the choirs and some of the rehearsals were registered on audio-visual media. Data were also collected during pre- and pos-rehearsal activities, such as writing rehearsal plans and evaluation reports, reading and discussing rehearsal plans and evaluation reports written by other students, as well as discussions on voice building with supervisors — identified here as second and third authors — and the students team. Data related to previous years were collected through analysis of *Comunicantus: Choral Laboratory*'s protocol documentation, consisting of weekly rehearsals' evaluation and reports of educational practices registered since 2001. These data were analysed qualitatively and compared with specialised literature, based on authors such as Ehmann & Haasemann (1982), Garretson

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(1998), Miller (1986), Pfautsch (1988), Robinson & Winold (1976), Smith & Sataloff (2006), Swan (1988) and Thomas (1979).

Since the first author carried out the practical part directly with the choirs, we opted for the methodology of action research, in which the researcher has an active role (Thiollent, 2002). Another reason for choosing this methodology is the fact that action research aims to improve the teaching practice. Considering, as explained earlier, that the conductor often acts as a voice teacher, especially during voice building activities, the cycle of action research methodology seemed the most favourable to address our questions, principally those related to the training of the voice builder. In this cycle, "one improves practice by systematically oscillating between taking action in the field of practice, and inquiring into it. One plans, implements, describes, and evaluates an improving change to one's practice" (Tripp, 2005, p. 446). Reflection permeates all this cyclic structure, rather than being a separate phase, so that the end of a cycle is the starting point for the next one, in an iterative and cumulative process.

The training of the voice builder

Students training to be voice builders learn by practising at weekly rehearsals with the community choirs and at weekly lessons where they evaluate the results of their performance, discuss the necessities of the choir and plan voice building activities for the next rehearsal. The training aims to provide skills and knowledge in vocal technique and choral conducting, including elements such as vocal perception and pedagogy. Students also learn to use different exercises for voice building, such as breathing or vocal exercises, which are chosen in accordance with the learning needs of the choir.

At *Comunicantus: Choral Laboratory*, the care for the voice of each chorister is a condition for the teaching and learning of vocal technique within the choir. For this reason, every person interested in participating in the community choirs undergoes an interview and a voice classification, performed by supervisors or by an advanced student. Other students are invited to attend, in order to learn how to classify voices. This individual listening helps students to recognise some vocal characteristics of the candidate and to form a memory of his or her voice, which can be useful in future voice building activities.

Recognising and understanding choristers' patterns of vocal production, especially the inefficient ones, is a learning process that continues to develop in lessons and rehearsals. This is one of the main skills for the activity of the voice builder and is called vocal perception. Vocal perception is a practical ability which enables the identification of vocal adjustments in singing through auditory control, vision, muscle sensations and vibrational sensitivity. It is first developed by analysing one's own vocal production and is then extended to the analysis of the choristers' one, allowing the voice builder to diagnose an inefficient vocal production and to understand what needs to be done to improve it (Drahan, 2007). The ability of vocal perception becomes more complex when confronted with the collective nature of voice building for choirs, since the voice builder needs to pay attention to both individual and collective sound, recognising and differentiating issues of the group from those exclusive of a member. At this point, the student who attended the voice classification has an advantage, because he has already started forming a memory of individual vocal characteristics of the choristers.

When working with the choir, the voice builder can analyse choristers' singing mainly through visual and auditory control. Analysing the vocal production through vision involves attention to aspects such as posture (e.g., an arched spine, high shoulders), breathing (an upward movement of shoulders during inspiration, for example), tensions in the face, too raised or too low chin, protruding jaw, etc. By analysing the voice production through hearing one can perceive, for example, if the inspiration was noisy (suggesting tension in the larynx) or if there was glottal attack (indicating the onset was not coordinated). Through vocal quality one can perceive the internal adjustments of the chorister, involving, for example, the larynx (if the position is high or low), the tongue (if it is tensioned), the folds vocal (if there is excessive muscle contraction in adduction) and the soft palate (if it is high or low).

During this research, we observed that developing vocal perception, especially through auditory control, is one of the first challenges students face when they start performing voice building activities. Frequently, those students struggle to recognise what needs to be corrected and done to improve the choral sound. They may also have difficulties in explaining it to the choir, tending to use too specific musical and technical terms that untrained people don't comprehend.

For this reason, the training at *Comunicantus: Choral Laboratory* includes pedagogical elements such as the association of new knowledge with those choristers already have. This association can facilitate communication between the voice builder or the conductor and choristers, making it more effective by using words and expressions that are part of the vocabulary of the choir. As Smith & Sataloff explains: "No amount of conducting skill or educational background will suffice if a conductor is unable to express information in a manner appropriate and acceptable to the

choir" (Smith & Sataloff, 2006, p. 10). It may be, thus, necessary that students create new ways of explaining a technical element, offering different descriptions of the same issue to enable choristers to understand what is being asked.

The development of vocal perception and of pedagogical strategies in voice building is connected to the use of singing exercises. Students learn to choose exercises according to specific needs of the choir and/or of the repertoire, to create new exercises, as well as to give orientation and feedback to the choir on how to perform the exercises effectively. A complete discussion about the vocal exercises would be too wide and diverging from the aims of this paper; this discussion, however, can be found in the master's thesis which resulted from this research (HAUCK-SILVA, 2012). Briefly described, the research presented and discussed the most used exercises to improve posture, breathing and support, resonance, vowel differentiation, agility, staccato, sostenuto, homogeneity of vocal registers, extension and harmonic hearing. The description of each exercise included an explanation of its application, as well as indications of specific elements of vocal production to which the voice builder can attend to, thus suggesting ways to further the development of vocal perception.

Final Considerations

Voice building for community choirs could be considered by some to be the mere application of vocal exercises in rehearsal, for which a list of vocal exercises and skills on vocal technique would suffice. We consider, however, that, first, an exercise has no intrinsic value, since its effectiveness depends on adequate realisation, and second, that knowing how to sing does not equate to knowing how to teach singing. With this perspective, vocal exercises and skills on vocal

technique, even though they are certainly indispensable elements for voice building, are still only the starting point. In this research, we observed that members of choirs Escola and Oficina in general depend strongly on voice builder's orientation and feedback to perform exercises effectively. Therefore, knowledge on pedagogy and, principally, the ability of vocal perception are essential aspects in this training.

Moreover, voice building involves regarding the choir inside a context, considering its difficulties, facilities, motivations, needs, etc., in order to develop adequate rehearsal strategies. Hence, the training in community choirs can instigate music students to a creative and reflective practice, in which they learn to react to the specific moment of the choir, dealing with the real sound the choir achieves at each rehearsal and taking actions to improve it.

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