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Choral Construction

Building Beautiful Voices
in the Choral Setting



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Choral Construction/ Under Construction

- ❖ Taking a look at the footings **BEFORE** you pour that foundation.
- ❖ What are the basic elements of communication?



Choral Construction/ Under Construction

- ❖ Phonemes: one of the set of speech sounds in any given language that serve to distinguish one word from another. A phoneme may consist of several phonetically distinct articulations.



The Noises of Life

- ❖ Basically, the sounds of speech
- ❖ The sounds of communication
- ❖ The sounds of emotional expression
- ❖ The sounds of artistic interpretation
- ❖ The sounds that make up the human experience



The Noises of Life

- ❖ Are the formations of these sounds the same for all forms of emotional and artistic expression?
- ❖ Do we or should we really subscribe to the model of “Si parla, come si canta?”
- ❖ What if that concept only works for the phoneme structure of the original language that gave birth to that statement and concept, namely Italian?
- ❖ The phrase is NOT after all, “Sie singen, sie sprechen.”
- ❖ To answer this we must start with the building blocks, the fundamentals of each specific language.



So, What Are Vowels?

- VOWELS AND THEIR LABELS
 - ❖ Vowels: [a, e, i, o, u,] and sometimes y.....
 - ❖ Okay, fine, these are what we are told in school. But what about: [æ, ε, ɪ, ɔ, ɑ, ə, ʌ, and ʊ]?
 - ❖ AND I haven't even started on [y, ʏ, ø, œ, ø & ɜ]?
 - ❖ Should the anatomical formation of these phonemes be the same for singing as they are for speech?



So, What Are Vowels?

- VOWELS AND THEIR ANATOMY
 - ❖ Made with various parts of the tongue against various parts of the mouth
 - ❖ Made with the lips touching themselves and changing shape
 - ❖ Made with varying degrees of escaping air, changing in both quantity and force
 - ❖ Made by sending sound into other chambers/cavities of the head.



Singing vs. Speaking

- ❖ In singing, our mouths and the surrounding anatomy must be free to move in a myriad ways
- ❖ Sometimes those ways may seem exaggerated and NOT related to speech
- ❖ These very specific movements are vital for vowel sound accuracy and intelligibility in singing
- ❖ Tonal product is so very different in singing than in speech, especially in classically trained singers

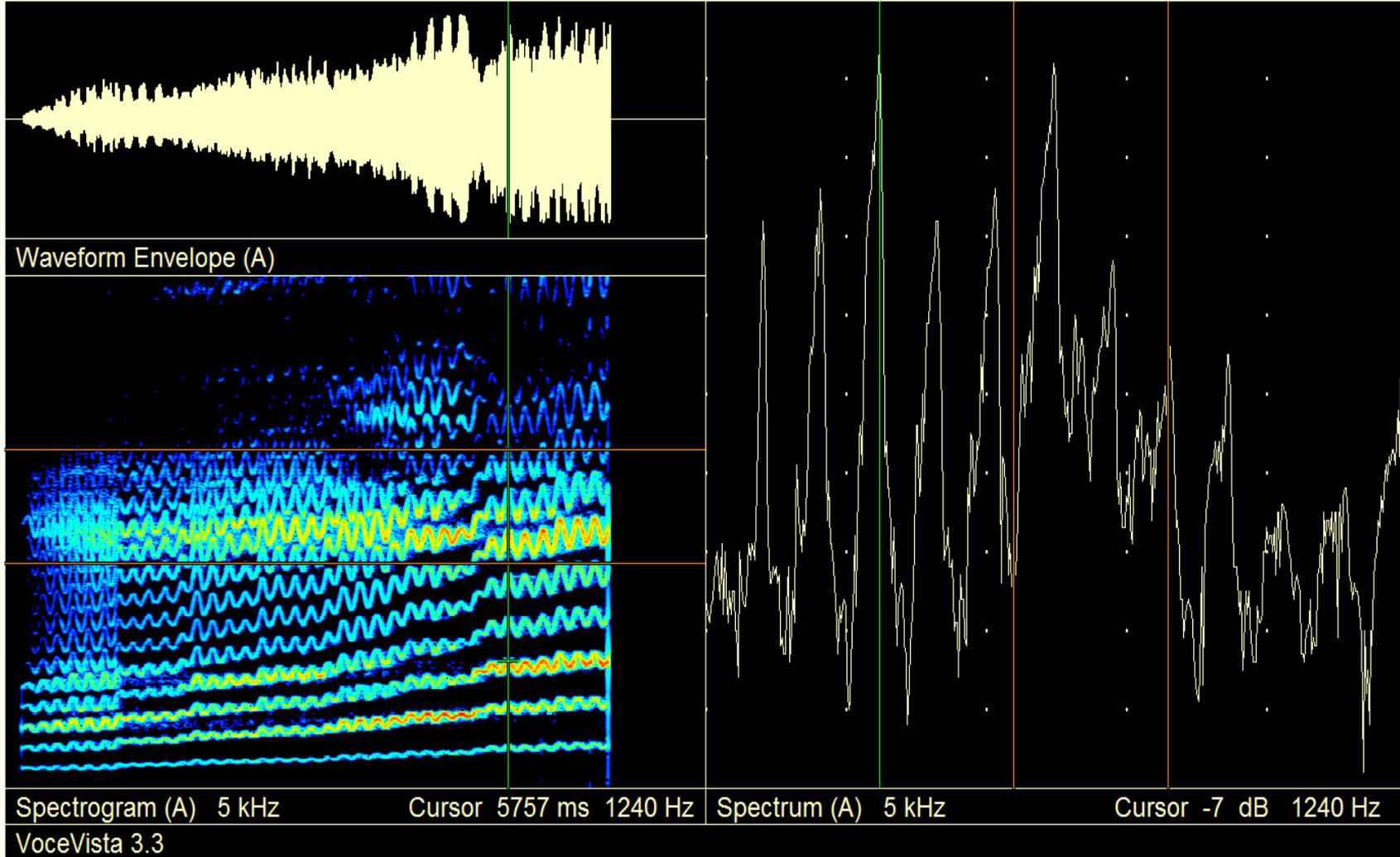


Before you pour....

- A quick introduction to spectral analysis and what this type of software can show.



.....Call Before You Dig





Human Voice: Why So Unique?

- No other instrument like it
- Resonance configurations change a trillion billion million times a day
- Changes called language
- Repurposed an organ to do amazing things
- Our voice is who we are
- We have learned to speak, but not everyone learns to sing



Human Voice: Why So Unique?

- So, what is it about classical singing?
- Discovery and development of the Singer's Formant (SF)
- Its presence is vital for the voice to carry over an orchestra, over a chorus and fill a hall without amplification
- Function of SF is so much more important than just making a lot of noise

ONTO VOCE VISTA VIDEO PRO



Today we hope to answer . . .

- What is “voice building”?
- Why is it important?
- What is the role of a choral conductor in building voices?
- What *vocal myths* should I rethink?



"Voice Building"





“Voice Building”

- Increasing our students’ vocal ability (*technique*) by every measure:
 - Tone quality
 - Range
 - Stamina
 - Dynamic contrast
- And, yes, increasing the [perceived/actualized] *size* of our students’ instruments.
 - How often does a contractor get called to *remove* a room from someone’s home? 😊



The Conductor-Constructor's Role





The Conductor-Constructor's Role

- What are we?
 - *Conductor-artist-teacher*
 - *Coach-counselor-confidante!*
- And when it comes to voice building:

CONSTRUCTION WORKER

(and the architect who drew up the plans!)



A Conductor-Teacher's Responsibilities





A Conductor-Teacher's Responsibilities

- *Primum non nocere*
 - First, do no harm!
- Don't just describe the sound you want—*tell them **how** to achieve it*



A Conductor-Teacher's Tools

- A listening ear
- A watching eye
- The “right” amount of positive pressure and motivation
- Knowing our singers’ voices *individually* and our singers as *individuals*



Why?





Why?

- We may be the only voice teachers our choristers will ever have.
- We have an educational responsibility to develop the skills of our singers.
- Better singers = better choirs.



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Myth #1: The Law Should Remain Stationary



Jaw Position

- Videos: “Sing a Mighty Song” – Daniel Gawthrop
 1. Overopen jaw
 2. Locked/closed jaw
 3. Jaw as hinge









Jaw Position

-3

[i]

-2

[e]

-1

[ɪ]

0

all other vowels

- Continue to open (+1, +2, +3) at *secondo passaggio*



Myth #2:

All Vowels Should Be the
Same/Neutral



Vowels

- Videos: “Arise, My Soul, Arise” – Dan Forrest
 1. Rounding lips on every vowel
 2. Unaffected/vowel clarity & distinctiveness

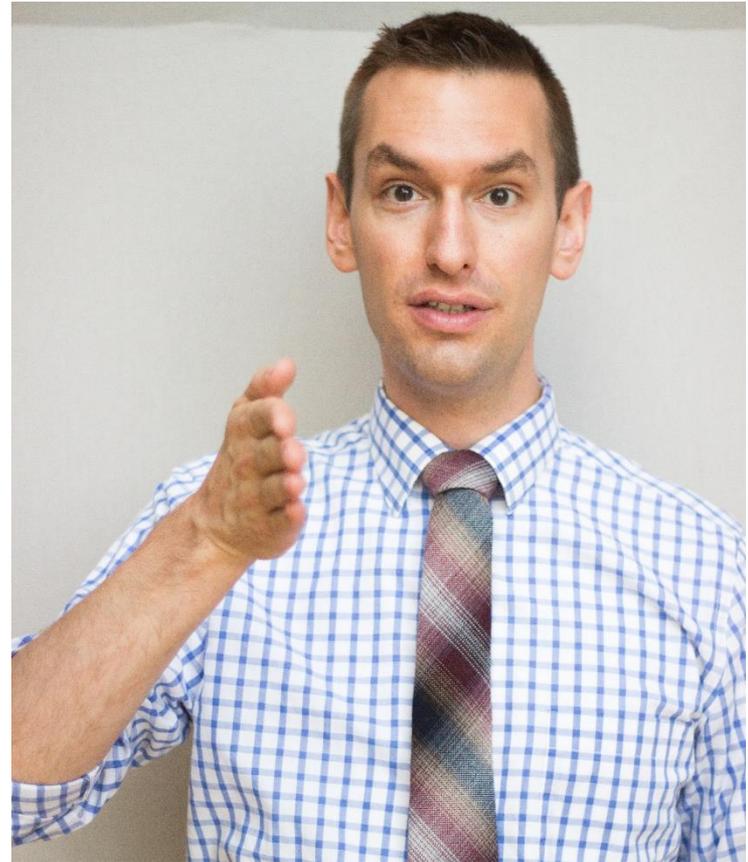






Vowels

- [i] (“ee”) as in *keep*





Vowels

- [ɪ] (“ih”) as in *bit*





Vowels

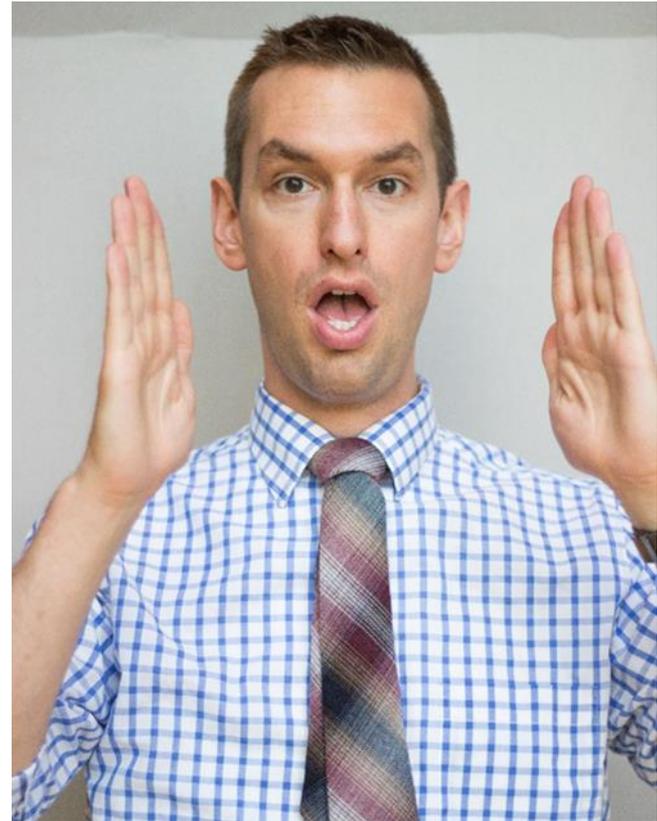
- [e] (“ay”) as in *cake*





Vowels

- [ɛ] (“eh”) as in *bed*





Vowels

- [æ] as in *cat*





Vowels

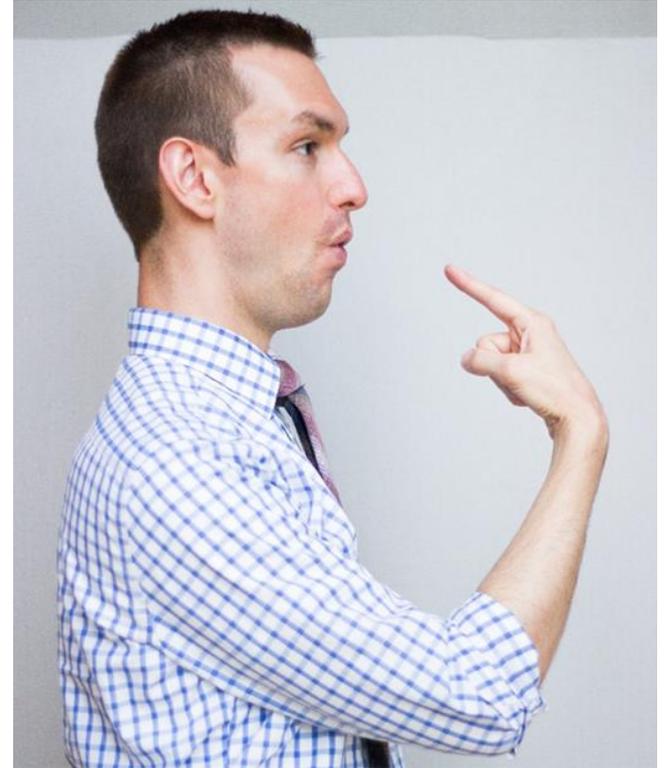
- [a] or [ɑ] (“ah”) as in *voilà* or *father*





Vowels

- [u] (“oo”) as in *scoop*





Vowels

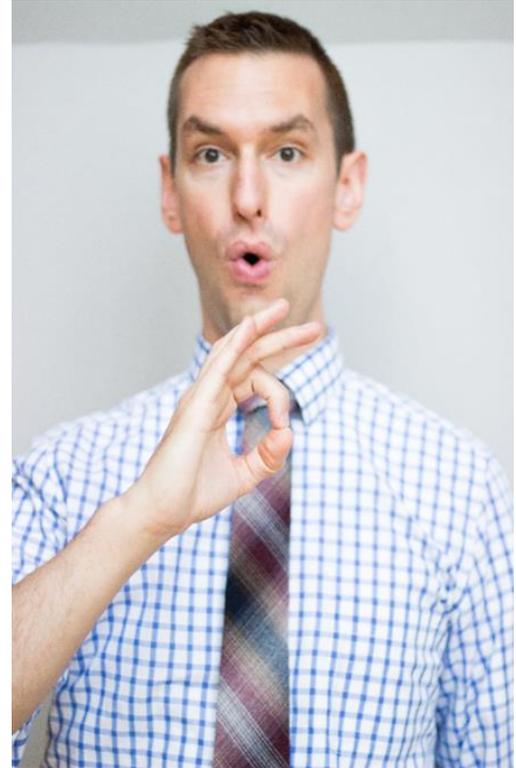
- [ʊ] as in *book*





Vowels

- [o] (“oh”) as in *boat*





Vowels

- [ʌ] or [ə] (“uh”) as in *bump*





Myth #3: Good Choirs Reduce Singer's Formant



Singer's Formant

- Videos:
 - “Depth of Mercy” – David Rasbach
 1. Extreme “pyramid balance” (reduce singer’s formant in women’s voices especially)
 2. “Cylinder balance”
 - «Отче наш» – Constantine Shvedov
 1. Reduce vocal freedom/vibrancy (reduce singer’s formant in all voices)
 2. More soloistic approach











Additional Myths



Myths

- ~~“Sing as you speak.” (*Si canta come si parla.*)~~
 - Sing as you should (could!) speak!
- ~~Build your choir’s sound from *piano*.~~
 - ***Cantare primo forte e doppio . . .*** (*Sing first strong and then . . .*)





Placement

- “**Placement**”—to use or not to use?
 - Forward/high/back/low
 - Ideas vs. behaviors—what are these instructions?
- It’s a fine shorthand, *if* all the singers in your choir share a common understanding of it (but they probably won’t).
- A humble idea: Perhaps we should use adjectives instead of verbs.
 - E.g., “Brighter, please!” instead of “You need to sing with a more forward placement.”
 - Why?
 - What is *placement* anyway?
 - The dangers of teaching for product (“make your ‘mask’ buzz!”) instead of process (*what* makes your “mask” buzz?)
 - If your students are studying voice privately, their studio definition may be different than your ensemble definition.
- An alternative definition of “good” placement or resonance:
The *absence of counterproductive tension* from any part of the vocal tract will cause desired resonance.



References & Recommended Resources



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QUESTIONS?

THANK YOU!

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