

The Aging Voice

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As the voice ages it becomes increasingly more important to use proper vocal technique to prevent the deterioration of the vocal mechanism. There is only so much we can do to delay the aging process but with attention to vocal care, proper posture and breathing technique, we can certainly maintain a healthy singing voice for a much longer time period. Church and Community Choirs are a great place for our older singers to continue to participate musically in a meaningful way, but often we as directors of these groups feel that we don't have the right to "correct" the singing technique of those singing in these groups because they are there for fun or to praise God in worship. I'm here to tell you that not only should you do this, but it is imperative you do so if you want to maintain a level of performance that will keep your program thriving and growing. No one wants to sing in an ensemble that sounds "old" or "wobbly", especially younger singers who are the life blood of your organization. Here are some ideas to use in your ensembles that may be helpful for you in addressing these issues.

Vocal care should be one of your top priorities as a choral director. Most of our adult singers work all day and don't often speak or use their voices correctly. Many speak in ranges that are not optimal for their singing voice and continually press down on the vocal mechanism as they speak. This causes fatigue and stress on the voice that translates into a strained and tense singing voice. Emphasize speaking with a singing quality to the tone and raising the pitch level at which they talk to help relieve some of the pressure on the voice.

Correct posture and breathing seem to be the first things to go as we age. Many community and church choirs rehearse for extended time periods and usually sitting in chairs which is not optimal. Older singers have a difficult time standing for extended periods and so it is important to allow some sitting time, but always insist on correct posture for sitting – both feet on the floor, sitting on the edge of your seat, and the back away from the chair. This will allow the singers to more effectively breathe and support the sound.

As our choir ages, vocal tone and resonance also suffer. This is generally caused by the lack of muscular coordination that develops over time. When the lower body is unable to support appropriately, tension begins to develop in the shoulders, neck, jaw and head. This leads to poor singing habits. You can help with this by involving bodily motion with warm –up exercises and this helps with posture and helps to energize the tone once again. Older singers simply forget what it feels like to sing correctly and we have to keep reminding them.

And finally, doing simple exercises to develop their inner hearing and sense of intonation is key to good ensemble sound. We make a big mistake by assuming they already know this and so we shouldn't have to address it. As singers age, their hearing and eyesight become weaker and so

they need to learn to adjust what they do vocally to accommodate for this decline in physical abilities. Older singers begin to “shout sing” to hear themselves and reminding them of good ensemble sound with a few key warm-ups is very beneficial for the entire organization.

And remember, always insist on proper vocal technique.