President’s Note

Dear Members of the SC Chapter of the ACDA! I am deeply honored and humbled to be taking the reins of this organization and very excited about some of the upcoming initiatives that we will be bringing to you over the next few years! Since joining the SC ACDA Board in 2011, I have witnessed tremendous growth within our organization. We continue to have successful State Fall Conferences, and our presence has grown at the Regional and National Conventions as well. Our upcoming Fall Conference on October 13th and 14th will once again offer showcase performances by some of the best choirs in our state, world class clinicians for our honor choir students (and us!) to learn from, and a great slate of professional development opportunities to help us continue to learn and grow as conductors and teachers! Our Fall 2018 Conference will take place in beautiful Charleston. We hope to see you all at both of these Conferences!

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The Myth of Nasal Resonance in Singing

I once struggled to please my private voice teacher, who urged me during a lesson to “Put more nasal resonance in that sound!” Eventually I produced the sound my teacher wanted to hear. As my cheeks “buzzed” I thought to myself, “This must be nasal resonance.” The effort and results were positive steps in my growth as a singer, but my teacher and I were both operating under a vocal belief system that included nasal resonance as an acceptable component of good singing. While the imagery was useful, we were both mistaken. What led my well-intentioned teacher to use this vocal myth as a means to improve my vocal sound? How may choral conductors—the voice teachers of the masses—better understand and interpret a phrase like “nasal resonance”?

To be clear my teacher was not encouraging me to sing a nasaled vowel sound or a nasaled consonant. Nasaled vowels and consonants are legitimate phonemes in many languages, which are produced by opening the velum—the valve portion of the soft palate. When the velum is lowered during singing, sound enters the nasal cavities, passes through the nasopharynx, then exits through the nose. Nasaled phonemes have a particular resonance pattern, but my teacher did not ask for this sound.

So how did I satisfy my teacher and produce this “nasal resonance?” Were sound vibrations in my nasal passages creating this sensation? Probably not. The nasal passages are filled with soft tissue and mucus—two of nature’s best sound absorbing materials. The poor resonance quality of the nasopharynx is easily demonstrated by singing a sustained vowel sound then closing the mouth to a hum without increasing the sustained breath energy. The loudness of the sound drops significantly as soon as the hum ensues. Human noses are poor resonators for any type of vocalism.

William Vennard in Singing: The Mechanism and the Technique strongly suggested that the soft palate should remain closed during singing, except for nasalized vowels and consonants. Vennard set up a simple experiment, demonstrating no difference between his singing sound during the control—singing a non-nasal vowel with a closed soft palate—and the experimental condition—singing a non-nasal vowel with a closed soft palate while his nose was filled with milk (a little messy, but a great experiment). A camera revealed that no milk could be seen on the back of Vennard’s throat during the experimental condition, indicating that the velum remained closed at all times. Vocal experts confirmed that the singing sound was identical in both the control and experimental conditions, confirming that the nasal passages play no role in vocal sound production (Vennard, William, “An Experiment to Evaluate the Importance of Nasal Resonance in Singing, Folia Phoniatrica et Logopaedica, 16:1964).

Why did my voice teacher ask for nasal resonance? Higher frequency resonance or singing with a “bright” tone has often been associated with nasal resonance. Some vocal pedagogy texts in the past advocated for opening the soft palate to improve nasal resonance. Given the poor resonance quality of the nasopharynx, however, this kind of voice instruction should be forgotten. Another form of nasal sound, labeled as “false nasality” by James McKinney (The Diagnosis and Correction of Vocal Faults), seems to
produce higher frequency energy on the power spectrum. McKinney (who was Vennard’s student) identified the source of this kind of resonance as hyperactivity in the pharyngeal constrictor muscles—otherwise known as pinching the throat. These muscles are used for swallowing. The “necktie tenor” and “country and western twang” sounds are the result of this false nasality. Both the sound and the misplaced technique are less desirable for choral singers.

Why did I mistakenly assume I was creating nasal resonance during my voice lesson? After all, my cheeks were “buzzing.” The “buzzing” sensation singers sometimes experience in parts of the face is most likely a result of nerve stimulation. Many nerves in the face emanate from the vegus nerve, a major nerve in the core of the body that also connects to the larynx and the diaphragm. Nerve impulses travel up and down this nerve and its branches during singing. New stimuli, even a minute change in vocal technique, may lead to new nerve sensations like “buzzing” cheeks or foreheads. Notably, experienced singers often become desensitized to these tingling nerve events.

In subsequent voice lessons, I learned that my voice teacher’s request for nasal resonance was indeed an image that helped some voice students put greater energy into the higher frequencies of the voice resonance pattern or power spectrum. This high frequency resonance has been described as “the singer’s ring,” a peak of sound energy around 3,500 Herz that is a resultant combination of bands of peak amplitude in the power spectrum of the singing voice. These bands of energy in “the singer’s ring” are the third, fourth, and sometimes the fifth formants: a phenomenon observed by numerous researchers. The voice scientist Johann Sundberg (“Articulatory Interpretation of the ‘Singing Formant,’” Journal of the Acoustical Society of America, 55:1974) identified the source of this special resonance energy as the space in the vocal tract immediately above the glottis in the collar of the larynx. Sundberg’s complete discussion of singing articulation and resonance (The Science of the Singing Voice, 1987) explains that these higher frequency formants are amplified when the vocal tract is expanded by lowering the larynx (to a comfortably low position) and arching the soft palate during singing. I am confident that this was the sound my teacher wanted to hear, and the sound that I eventually produced in that memorable voice lesson.

In the course of choir rehearsals choral conductors must guard against communication errors with singers who may have difficulty understanding the context of certain images. If one-on-one voice lessons can result in miscommunication, there are myriad possibilities to convey misinformation in choral rehearsals. Choral teacher-leaders must also provide accurate pedagogical content to their choirs. Detailed knowledge of the vocal instrument, including the field of voice science, helps conductors advance the overall vocal technique of their choirs, avoiding myths such as “nasal resonance” that could lead singers astray.
Learning Objectives in the Choral Rehearsal

With the beginning of each school year comes the review and implementation of procedures and evaluation systems in our schools. During our opening professional development session at my school, we discussed the South Carolina Teaching Standards 4.0 rubric that will be implemented as an evaluation tool during the 2018-2019 school year. I began to reflect on how we utilize learning objectives and increase engagement specifically in the choral classroom, as these are the first two sections of the newly adopted 4.0 rubric; Standards and Objectives & Motivating Students. How can we effectively use learning objectives to integrate state standards, connect what students have previously learned, create clear student expectations, and provide an engaging and inquiry-based lesson? Our schools typically expect us to post some type of standard, objective, essential question, “I Can” statement, etc., in order to meet these criteria.

State Standards and Learning Objectives
As choral directors, if we choose age-appropriate repertoire and teach music literacy skills throughout the academic year we will have a strong foundation to teach our state standards. We should consider the various musical genres, historical eras, tonalities, meters, languages, cultures, and forms of accompaniment to help us meet state standards and engage students.

Learning Objectives are a tool that teachers use to ensure students are aware of the skills and goals they should be able to complete during the lesson(s). This allows students a glimpse of our daily rehearsal plans in order to raise awareness of musicianship skills to sing and perform successfully. When designing lessons, learning objectives are an important tool to formulate engaging and inquiry-based lessons.

Sample Learning Objectives
I’ve created several sample learning objectives to be used when teaching the All-State Chorus Audition piece Honor and Glory by J.S. Bach. At my school, we have students read these statements aloud at the beginning of the lesson. I have found this works very effectively to increase student comprehension of the skills being addressed in the objective. Students know what to expect, what skills we will be using or developing, and have a goal to work toward.

I can identify the parts of a fugue (subject/countersubject) and explain their function in “Honor and Glory.”
This learning objective focuses on the form of this Baroque piece and could be used as an introductory or closing lesson where students understand how their part is woven into the fugal counterpoint. This is a perfect opportunity to discuss compositional devices in Bach’s writing in relation to how we sing and interpret this piece.

I can solfege and sing mm. 1-17 in my own section and combined with other parts.
This learning objective is very specific and would most likely be appropriate for a couple of rehearsals or used as a sub-objective. The specificity of this objective provides students with a daily goal for learning this piece at an appropriate pace.

I can explain and model the articulation and phrasing needed to sing Honor and Glory in a stylistically appropriate manner. In this learning objective, students are being asked to hypothesize or recall musical elements from past lessons needed to perform Honor and Glory. Students could use musical terminology to explain, or model vocally for other students. Instead of only providing students with explicit instructions, we can help guide students through this process so they are aware of the pedagogical components and are able to transfer these skills to future rehearsals.

FINAL THOUGHTS
Combining standards and learning objectives with a balanced choral repertoire and music literacy skills helps students develop their musicianship in an engaging way. When used effectively, the discussion prompted by learning targets need not be lengthy or take an inordinate amount of rehearsal time. Learning targets can enhance the instructional strategies we already use, and allow students to enter the music-making journey from another perspective. Through the utilization and discussion of learning targets in class, students can successfully connect these skills not only to the lesson at hand, but also to future rehearsals. Formative assessment can help guide and create future learning objectives, as we can quickly identify and address areas where students may struggle collectively. By helping students understand the specific skills needed to be successful and independent choral musicians, we encourage them to take these skills beyond our classrooms and become lifelong singers.
And Am I Born to Die?
Corporate Vernacular Singing in South Carolina

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And Am I Born to Die?

As South Carolinians and choral musicians, we are the keepers of a rich culture of vernacular singing practices. At this year’s Fall Conference, I will present a session aiming to illuminate the fading, yet treasured traditions of shape-note singing and hymn lining. Session attendees will engage with shape-note tunes through stylistically accurate performance and discourse centered on how these tunes have been adapted into standard choral repertoire suitable for academic and non-religious performance. Special thanks are extended to Dr. Isaiah R. McGee and the Claflin University Concert Choir for agreeing to assist me in performing and demonstrating some of this valued repertoire.

Shape-Note Tunes
Over the last several decades shape-note singing has been rendered virtually extinct, but has experienced a revival in recent years. The shape-note tunes themselves exist as a bridge between the tradition of European hymnody and the needs of early American worshipers in the rural south. This music represents not only a remarkable body of church music, but also the emergence of an American middle-class that valued corporate music-making. The two most significant bodies of repertoire in the shape-note tradition are the Southern Harmony and Sacred Harp tunebooks, both of which had their genesis in South Carolina. The compilers of these collections, William Walker; E.J. King; and Benjamin F. White, were residents of upstate South Carolina and the first edition of the Southern Harmony tunebook was published in Spartanburg, SC.

Hymn Lining
Like shape-note singing, hymn lining was birthed out of early church leaders’ need to adjust their practices to engage and educate worshipers on the Word and ways of the Church. Again pulling from European traditions, most notably the Anglican and Calvinist churches, American musicians created an immediately identifiable aural and religious experience. Hymn lining features a leader who speaks a line of text from a hymn or psalm and an unmetered unison answer/response sung by the congregation. This call-and-response rote teaching and singing was perfectly suited for largely illiterate masses of worshipers. The contributions of African Americans to this tradition are difficult to overstate. The texts of the long-loved poems and hymns of the church were taught to enslaved Africans, who set the texts to their own modal melodies complete with embellishments and exhortations derived from the African continent. Though much less prominent than it once was, the tradition of hymn lining has survived to this day as a beloved memorial of the early days of the rural southern church.

Final thoughts
We have at our fingertips a wealth of musical traditions, styles, and genres found throughout our state. We can raise awareness of these styles through quality, thoughtful performances and by instilling a sense of value for vernacular musical traditions in our singers. I encourage you to tap into these homegrown resources and create experiences that allow your singers to learn about social contexts, historical performance practices, and local cultures.