

## “The Development of a Choral Instrument”

(Based on the Howard Swan chapter from *Choral Conducting A Symposium*)

### Opening statement- Considerations/Philosophies

There are six choral “schools of thought” that in theory and practice have greatly influenced choral singing in America. Each of the six schools espouses specific philosophies, techniques, and goals developed by a master teacher and put into practice by his followers.

**A- John Finley Williamson- Westminster Choir-** “vitality of tone”, voice class, encourage each singer to develop personally, intellectually, and musically. You are important! Differences are recognized, “**lift**” used to classify range of singer, vowel modification, steeple balance, diction taught by series of rules, natural **vibrato encouraged, regular and unchangeable seating**. In warm-ups the choir tunes to an A major chord. S1, T1, A2, B2, on root, S 2 + T2 on 5th, B1, A1 on 3<sup>rd</sup>.

2 Tenor	1 Tenor	2 Bass	1 Bass
1 Alto	2 Alto	1 Soprano	2 Soprano

Warm ups sung staccato, emphasis on attack. “uh” for women, oo (as in soot) for men, eventually moving to a sung vowel on a “vuh” sounding like a wail or a siren. Men will go to “ay” and will be asked to “weight” the sound to create desired steeple balance. Choral sound must communicate emotion. The conductor never forces his chorus to do his will; he allows the singers to create the mood or emotion by themselves. **Phrasing is conceived as the result of mood or emotion.**

Example- *Dies irae*, Requiem- Mozart

What we hear: Full, dark weighty, vibrant sound; emphasis on meaning of text; dynamic contrast.

We do not hear: Emphasis on blend; emphasis on rhythmic phrasing; legato singing, or thin texture.

**B- Father William J. Finn- Paulist Choristers-** “Music is the most powerful spiritual instrumentality by which human being can be moved”. “Beauty of tone.” **Chorophony** or chorophonic will indicate the study of the choral art just as symphony or symphonic indicates the orchestral art. The chorister’s tone is like the color of an orchestral instrument and should be developed accordingly. All vocalization will have an effect on tone color. Each song text and genre will determine the sounds used. Warm-ups include long soft pianissimo hum, moving to POO. Light descending patterns starting with consonants. “Pianissimo is like a photographer’s darkroom... light destroys an untreated film and *forte* destroys a unplaced voice.” **Vowels will be used to imitate timbres of instruments: ee- string, oo- flute, ah- reed, aw- horn. Renaissance specialist.**

**Boys choir. No individual vibrato used.**

Example- *Hymn of the Cherubim*, Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom - Rachmaninoff

What we hear: A small, bright, thin, floating tone, an excellent blend; soft dynamic; a “polyphonic” tone.

We do not hear: Big voices; rhythmic vitality; excellent diction; dark voices; emotional interpretation.

**C- F. Melius Christiansen- St. Olaf Choir;** (Olaf Christiansen, Weston Noble-Luther Choir)- “search for the truth; art stands above and alone, the tone of a choir is it’s greatest asset.” By its very nature good ensemble quality exists only as individual concepts disappear. **Blending- matching vowels and tone, model voice, vowel modification, tune chords, begin with unison, solo vibrato is discouraged, balance by exact numbers 60 members, “a cappella” tone, diction precise, audition repeat and imitate, unification of vowels, legato phrasing and placement of singers. “Sing long on the vowel, lock the chords.”** Example- *Praise to the Lord*, arr. Christiansen  
**Bass Tenor Block formation. 60 members- S1-10, S2- 8, A1- 7, A2-8**  
**Soprano Alto B1-6, B2-10, T1-5, T2- 6**

What we hear: The ultimate choral blend; precision attack and release; vowels on beat, precise intonation.

We do not hear: Rhythmic elements expressed in sound; vibrato; big tone; extreme resonance; great dynamic contrast.

**D- Fred Waring, The Pennsylvanians (Glee Club)** - “all the beauty of all the sounds, of all the syllables, of all the words... and interpret accordingly.” **Tone syllables-**“Diction is used to achieve balance and unity.” First professional choir in the field of entertainment. The “father” of the show choir. All sounds have a “slot” in time. Robert Shaw assistant conductor 1939- Glee Club. Rehearsal was unified repetition of the sounds of the words to create feeling of complete choral homogeneity, which he called “togetherness.” “Rhythm is more important than tone quality or blend.” **Exaggerate vowel sounds and consonants with pitched duration, continuity of word-to-word, syllable-to-syllable. Uniformity= articulation + enunciation + pronunciation.**

Example- *All The Things You Are*, Kern/ Hammerstein, arr. Ringwald

What we hear: Tone is comfortably sung; splendid diction; excellent legato phrasing; “speech in song”.

We do not hear: Great dynamic variation; changes in color; evidence of singers being taught to use their individual vocal instrument.

**E- John C. Wilcox, Joseph J. Klein and Douglas Stanley-** singing is “scientific”. The scientific method (mechanistic) will teach each singer to reach full vocal potential by improving their solo voices by means of: extending range, increasing volume, improving tone, and developing a clear and natural vibrato. **Singers will work toward: three octave range, low larynx, full big dark operatic sound, loosen jaw, free tongue, and an acceptance of weak and strong registers to strengthen the vocal range. The correct phonation and support of tone demand unusual coordination of the various parts of the breathing mechanism.**

Example- *Procession and Chorale, Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg* - Wagner

What we hear: A chorus of solo voices; huge vital sound, often thrilling; the sound is easily produced.

We do not hear: A tone exemplifying the usual choral standard; balance; diction; clarity of ensemble.

**F- Robert Shaw-** “The dramatic integrity of choral tone”. Sound depends on individual score, sections, and phrases. “Music is order in sound”, pitch, tone, dynamics, speech, and rhythm. “Time is music’s canvas.” Every song is performed for the first time! Each performance is the first performance. Tone carries the emotion not the words. Pronounce all the sounds of the words not the words themselves. Every sound has its own “slot.” **Count sing (subdivision), 16 pulsed 1/2 step. Vowels on beat. Consonants in 3 groups: 1-sustained pitch, 2- fractional pitch, 3- no pitch. In the audition, each choir member is “weighted” for seating. Singers will move from part to part to achieve balance. Conductor’s score fully marked with details.“ You are not following a beat, you are making a beat.”**

**Quartet position-   SBTA  
                                  TASB**

Example- *Gloria*, Coronation Mass- Mozart

What we hear: Vigorous tone; elasticity in tone; rhythmic elements felt by singers; diction shapes phrase; sound in motion; exciting uses of tone color.

We do not hear: Tone exploited as an aesthetic experience; emphasis on expressive rubato; elements of musical sound and interpretation divorced from the score.

## **Summary**

The conductor should be aware of the sound he desires and the technical facility to achieve that sound. It is the conductor’s responsibility to understand style in reference to sound. The conductor should work toward the goal of “serving the music.”

## **Musical Connections**

**Howard Swan** (1906-1995) is a graduate of **Pomona College**. **Swan** became a social studies teacher. In 1929, **Swan** is hired as an interim conductor for the high school Glee Club. **Robert Shaw (Choir F)** is in **Swan**’s social studies class. **Shaw** sings in the Glee Club, with **Swan** as conductor and also assists. Later **Shaw** attends **Pomona College**. **Fred Waring (Choir D)** discovers **Shaw** at **Pomona College** and later appoints him as assistant conductor in 1939. In the 1950’s **Shaw** guest conducts at Westminster, working with **John Finley Williamson. (Choir A) Joe Klein (Choir E), Robert Shaw (Choir F)** and **Howard Swan (author)** were friends. Early in **Swan**’s career, he paralyzes his vocal folds and is helped by **Williamson**. **Williamson** is able to help **Swan** speak in a weak falsetto. In 1969, **Swan** has Teflon treatments to improve his vocal production. **Weston Noble (Choir C)** informed me that he met **Shaw** in the late 1940’s, and was very impressed by **Shaw**’s methods.

In the late 1930’ s, **Father Finn (Choir B)** described recent developments in the choral art. He said, alluding to **Fred Waring (Choir D)**, “The radio audience is showing itself to be moderately interested in ensemble singing. This is due, probably, to the increasing excellence of radio choirs.”

## General Bibliography

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### **Suggested Reading**

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rev. 1950.

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University Press, 1997.

Wilcox, John C. The Living Voice. Carl Fischer 1935

Interest Session/Lecture “Choral Schools”

NYSCAME Balanced Mind Arts Conference- 1996

NYSSMA Winter Conference- 1998

New York University- 2000

NYSCAME Balanced Mind Arts Conference- 2004

ACDA Eastern Convention- 2004

Queens College, Aaron Copland School of Music- 2004

United Kingdom- Birmingham, England- 2005

Hofstra University- 2007

Hartt School of Music- 2008

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