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Patrick K. Freer
Georgia State University, pfreer@gsu.edu

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CHRONICLING THE BOYS' CHANGING VOICE
THROUGH THE FIRST CENTURY OF MENC JOURNALS
(Revised)

Patrick K. Freer

Since 1914, the *Music Educators Journal* (initially titled *Music Supervisors' Bulletin* and then *Music Supervisors' Journal*) has served the music education profession by providing a platform for the broad dissemination of philosophy, practice-based techniques, research implications, and reports of MENC's efforts. Exploration of past issues of the *Music Educators Journal (MEJ)* provides a view toward the collective wisdom of the profession, a sense of perspective, and a glimpse into the challenges and opportunities that have shaped current conditions.

Middle school choral teachers have many available resources outlining teaching strategies, pedagogical approaches, and repertoire developed to address the needs of young adolescents and their changing voices. Many of these resources come from established experts, and they contain practical information that can be readily employed within the choral classroom. However, few of these resources convey the breadth and longevity of related discussions within the profession. This article is intended to highlight words from the past so that choral teachers can more fully participate in current discussions about working with adolescent singers.

This particular exploration is of the boys' changing voice and how it has been portrayed in *MEJ* over time. Much of the research and resulting pedagogical techniques concerning the boys' changing voice developed in America during *MEJ*'s existence. An initial search for *MEJ* content mentioning the matter revealed in excess of 400 items from 1914 to 2007. The content review reported here focused on the 65 articles, reports, and letters to the editor that have

substantively addressed issues facing teachers who work with adolescent boys and their changing voices.

While she did not directly refer to the adolescent male singer, MENC founder Frances Elliott Clark set the tone for this remarkably broad discussion in 1918: "The Avocation of a child or adult is the key to his character. Pernicious influences often seize upon a boy or girl in their evening hours and wreck their lives . . . If a boy or girl can be interested in music, can sing in a choir, can play an instrument in orchestra or band or at home, there is at once a strong opposite pull to the temptations of the street, the cabaret, the pool room or cheap picture show."[1] She later wrote, "we must reach the 23,000,000 children in our public schools with the message and experience of real Music, only the best in Music - and build it into the lives of our children and adolescent citizens." This was also important to Ann Dixon, who is credited with the first mention of the phrase "changed voices" appearing in the *Music Supervisors' Bulletin* in 1915 within a discussion of the need to support boys in the high schools of Duluth, Minnesota.[3]

Opportunity or Problem?

The boys' changing voice has been referred to as both an opportunity and a problem within the pages of *MEJ*. Alice Rodgers wrote in 1926, "The adolescent child is especially impressionable, and properly directed, can be awakened to beauty through music, and led to love to express himself in singing . . . boys especially need help and encouragement at this time, and a chance to become acquainted with their new voices, and to read music in the bass clef."[4] Three decades later, Bruce Bray noted that, "Music is still fun and uncomplicated for most seventh-graders. But problems arise in the eighth and ninth grades. This necessitates great care and much effort to assure a continued participation in vocal music groups."[5]

Karl Gehrkens wrote of the possibility that general music might engender enthusiasm from these boys because "when he once gets over the fear of being called a 'sissy' for liking the tonal art, he is likely to become an even more loyal and ardent devotee of his musical organization than is the girl."[6] Several others wrote of igniting interest in boys, including a description of a "class of eighth-grade boys, all of them more or less recently come to America from the potato fields of peasant Europe - huge, heavy-eyed fellows who had not yet discovered what [singing] was all about."[7] Many *MEJ* authors were as passionate as Irvin Cooper: "The future is bright, but it behooves the junior high school general music teacher and choral director to realize to the full this brightness by coming to grips with the vocal problems which beset him (not the children)."[8]

Cooper wrote that when music education was extended to every child in the junior high during the 1920s, "singing was the first item on the new course - it costs least. The singing of girls' groups was capably handled, but the moment mixed classes or boys' classes where the boys' voices were passing through the change were tried, conditions were chaotic. Even unison singing of traditional tunes was an unmusical farce. Poor, poor boys . . . The solution of the Junior High School choral problem lies in the ability of the teacher (a) to identify each boy's voice according to quality and range, classifying it accurately . . . , (b) to organize the boys into part groups, (c) to integrate these groups with girls' voices, (d) to select singing material within the vocal ranges of these various parts."[9]

A large number of *MEJ* authors sought to effect Cooper's solution by examining the characteristics of the adolescent boy and his vocal physiology, and then drawing implications for pedagogy and choral singing.

The Adolescent Boy

In 1957, David Abel offered, "Any inherent sensitivity of the individual to his general appearance which might make for awkwardness where the acceleration of the parts has outdistanced the equilibrium and grace of the whole, is generally heightened by the onset of a changing voice . . . The effect of hearing one's voice express, if only momentarily, the musical gamut of a Tebaldi in height to a Pinza in depth must be strange indeed, considering its recent normality."[10] Frederick Swanson put it this way: "Well, can you imagine a teen-age boy who cannot swim well choosing to swim with a group of classmates who are good swimmers? Especially if some of them are girls?"[11]

Whether or not the changing voice itself deters boys from singing is a subject of debate, at least according to research presented in *MEJ*. In 1988, Kenneth Phillips related, "Students . . . name the adolescent voice change and the relevance of singing to their career goals as the leading causes behind boys' decisions to drop out of choral music."[12] In contrast, a 2000 article by Steven Demorest reported the reasons for boys' non-participation in choir "were related not to vocal or musical concerns, but to male identity."[13]

More than reports of research, however, the observations of teachers about their students have been reported most frequently in *MEJ*. In 1941, Anthony Viggiano wrote, "We should first try to understand boys themselves and look at the problem from their point of view. We are as much educators as musicians, and we must know adolescence and all its thoughts, ambitions and social interpretations."[14] Forty years later, Gail Caissy noted, "No longer children, but not yet adults, early adolescents seem to be struggling in an in-between world, trying to decide where they belong."[15] Swanson wrote that for teachers, there is emotional "satisfaction to be derived from a roomful of young boys - eager, loyal, responsive to discipline and channeling their high

spirits into a team-project . . . they are really uncertain, awkward, somewhat scared boys who would like to be young men but don't quite know how and would like to have somebody help them - if it can be done without loss of face."[16]

For many *MEJ* authors, part of the answer could be achieved by providing boys with information about the physiology of their changing voices. Phillips wrote in 1988, "The study of the structure and workings of the larynx makes a stimulating unit . . . This knowledge can then be linked to an understanding of the physical development . . . it is nothing to be feared and is less likely to be feared if students understand the process before it begins. Waiting until the voice is changing may be too late."[17]

Masculinity and Sports

A common theme through these *MEJ* articles was an emphasis on addressing issues of masculinity within the choral music program. Gehrkens wrote that the boy "welcomes the chance to use his lower tones on an appropriate part - if possible called bass! - even as a little later he will welcome the chance to use a razor on his chin, before it is - strictly speaking - necessary."[18] In 1966, C. H. Slaughter offered the following dilemma: "Boys in all cultures are expected to become men . . . If we wish to change boy's attitudes towards music . . . our changes should be directed toward making music a more masculine activity."[19]

Other writers took a more direct approach toward the masculinity issue by emphasizing sports analogies. For example, Ruth Jenkin offered advice in 1942 to an imaginary new teacher: "Prove to your boys that the glory of singing a fine song is almost equal to the glory of gaining twenty yards . . . That day will dawn when the coach will come to you and say, 'Knock-em-cold Hooligan has been slipping because of too many rehearsals for the boys' octet. Do you suppose

we could plan a schedule so that he can get a little more time off before the big game?' By the time you reach this point, you will have built up such a strong constitution that you probably won't faint."[20]

In 1930, Alfred Spouse wrote, "the boys' song should of course be 'manly' in atmosphere, one which has to do with the out-of-doors, the sea, or ambition."[21] But in 1963, William Rice noted, "The idea that manliness and 'bassiness' are synonymous is often implanted in the minds of boys by well-meaning but slightly misguided elementary teachers, and by family and friends. As a result, most boys try diligently to sing bass while ignoring their high voices."[22]

Toward a Research Base

Beginning in 1960, a series of *MEJ* articles, reports and letters related the emergence of the first strands of research linking physiology and pedagogy. Swanson wrote about keeping "records of the vocal development of junior high school boys, month by month, season by season . . . From these records, accompanied by research, a pattern has emerged and some working hypotheses have been developed . . . Voice mutation [change] occurs because of the rapid growth in size and proportion of the larynx, resulting from the effects of certain hormones appearing in the body."[23]

Cooper's research led him to England where he would be often treated to "truly magnificent singing by the school senior choir (SATB) . . . [after which] inquiry concerning the choral singing of the age twelve to fifteen group usually elicited the reply, 'We don't use boys at that age, their voices are breaking and thus unusable.'"[24]

The research efforts of Swanson and Cooper initially pointed toward divergent results concerning the rate and sequence of boys' vocal development. Swanson criticized Cooper's

work for a number of reasons, particularly Cooper's "cambiata concept" that states the male changing voice is somewhat limited in range.[25] Cooper countered that "Mr. Swanson's impression of the incidence and range of junior high school bass voices could pose quite a problem. I beg most respectfully to suggest that in his diagnosis of the range of his junior high school bass voices - G to middle c - Mr. Swanson has succumbed to the bete noire of junior high voice teachers - the octave illusion associated with the boy's voice in the first phase of the change." [26]

Swanson responded, "The reference to the 'octave illusion,' the bete noire of junior high vocal teachers, completely bewildered me . . . Could it really be that we were not hearing the pitches we thought we were? . . . We listened again . . . I reran the tapes of our original subjects. No, this is not an illusion. Our basses do sing these low tones . . . Perhaps some day I can inspect the data Mr. Cooper has secured from his 100,00 subjects and follow his statistical procedures to discover why his conclusions are so greatly different than ours."[27]

The core of the Swanson/Cooper debate concerned the question of whether the boys' vocal change process was gradual or consisted of distinct stages. Swanson wrote, "the voice change, if not anticipated with special vocal training, may be characterized by a rather sudden, radical change . . . If the voice change is anticipated and suitable vocal exercises are begun, this awkward area need not go out of control and 'breaks' can be kept at a minimum."[28] Swanson later addressed this debate by pointing to the emerging research base: "Instead of deciding what should happen, there have been case studies where a sizable number of adolescent boys have been checked as to ranges not just once in a semester but every six weeks throughout a school year . . . Only rarely did boys appear who moved gradually, a few steps at a time, from treble to alto tenor to boy baritone to a mature baritone, bass, or tenor. In some cases, a boy might drop to

the low bass, stay there for six months, then begin to add tones in the upper bass clef again."[29]

It is interesting to note that the groundbreaking series of research articles by John Cooksey concerning the developing adolescent male voice was published in 1977 in the *Choral Journal*. The first *MEJ* mention of Cooksey's research occurred 22 years later, in a 1999 article by Kendra Kay Friar.[30] In preceding years, several articles and letters reported inaccurate information as fact, including: (1) the vocal folds of boys doubled in length, resulting in the pitch lowering of a perfect octave; (2) that hormones caused the laryngeal muscles to become stiff, with falsetto singing needed to relax them; (3) that singing low notes can irreparably strain the adolescent voice; that (4) unison singing is injurious to the voice; and (5) that baritones simply have more hormones than tenors.[31]

SIDEBAR ABOUT HERE (found on pp. 18-19)

Unison vs. Parts

The emerging research base provided evidence that different parts were needed to accommodate the different stages of male vocal development seen in middle school choral programs. If unison songs were to be sung by all students or even all boys, they would need to be carefully crafted with a limited range. The notion of assigning multiple vocal lines in choirs of young adolescents was a source of some controversy, as recorded within the pages of *MEJ*. In 1930, T. P. Giddings wrote, "Several articles have recently appeared advocating the 'spontaneous' singing of unison songs in the junior high schools, 'Spontaneous' seems to mean 'lets all get together and yell awhile!' . . . The poor kids meet in 'Assemblies,' howl heroically on unison songs while the piano roars and the leader calls for 'more pep.' It is a wonder that any

good voices ever grow up when they are mistreated like this."[32] Norman Phillips and John Scott similarly wrote, "there is nothing quite as appetizing to the ear as the sound of changing voices in a mixed junior high ensemble on a unison line such as the opening phrase of 'The Star-Spangled Banner.' In the changed voices, there is more likelihood that the curve of the melody will be preserved, but the occasional two octave gap between some of them and your treble voices will result in a musical effect desirable only in a selection for Halloween."[33]

While Phillips and Scott advocated for carefully-crafted unison songs, Giddings concluded, "Let us strike a good blow for music and eliminate the unison song from the junior high school, and many other simple subterfuge all along the line, and set our vocal house in order that it may function as it should!"[34] In 1957, Samuel Forcucci contributed, "Logically, the solution is to sing harmony because this allows everyone to sing where it is most comfortable. Again, this is good, but what parts do we give to our group? (1) The sopranos still sing the melody (this incidentally is comparatively 'easy' to hear and, best of all, quite prominent in the accompaniment). (2) The altos are singing, in most cases, a choice part which lies usually a third below the melody. (3) The boys have whatever is left." [35] In Swanson's words, "the girls 'coasted' while the boys struggled and gave up."[36]

Male and Female Ensembles

MEJ's authors have largely supported the notion of separate choral ensembles for boys and girls during adolescence. In 1922, Giddings wrote, "What these fellows need is extra practice just at this time. They yearn for a chance to show they are men and can do things in music uncontaminated by female help. They love to sing. They like it better than girls do, but

they are fussy about what they sing and how it sounds. They are very enthusiastic (they never say so) when it sounds well; bitterly critical, they speak right out, when it does not."[37]

To address this, a committee on singing during adolescence recommended in 1930 that girls and boys be segregated in music classes.[38] Swanson suggested telling an all-male group, "You are about to be given a new voice, maybe a more beautiful voice, and a whole new kind of singing will open up for you . . . This is strictly boys' business and the girls aren't even going to know what is going on until one day you will invite them in and they will be amazed at the new sounds they will hear."[39] On the other hand, authors such as Robert Conrad argued, "To further stimulate the interest of boys and girls in singing, it is best to work with mixed groups rather than with boys' and girls' glee clubs."[40]

Testing and Classifying Voices

Many authors have outlined adolescent voice testing and classification procedures for use by school music teachers. The earliest appeared in 1916, when Elsie Shawe highlighted voice testing as "a necessity for the preservation of the vocal organs of the boys and girls."[41] In 1928, Russell Morgan stated, "The testing and placing of voices properly is another mark of good teaching. Rarely done well, it is one of our chief obstacles in securing happiness and satisfaction in singing."[42] Jane Wisenall added, "If the shift from part to part is made in accordance with the results of careful voice-testing, the boy may sing through the entire period of mutation without the slightest injury to his vocal cords and without a noticeable break in his voice."[43]

The frustration of some teachers with the various classification and testing systems was exemplified by Josephine Holtgreve's reference to adolescent male singers as "what-you-prefer-to-call-them."[44] Swanson argued, however, that testing and classification was superior to being

labeled a "'deficient' singer or urged to somehow 'get the voice up there or down here.'"[45] "An academic discussion of voice labels and classifications is interesting," he wrote, "but what goes on in the classroom and the educational results we achieve are really of the first importance."[46]

Repertoire Selection and Pedagogy

Holtgreve wrote, "after all the theories have been expounded, voices categorized, and ranges standardized, you still have a chorus of boys whose ranges and abilities are different. What are they going to sing? . . . The songs must be tailored to suit the voices, not vice versa. And the voices are mighty hard to suit."[47] Dick Thompson agreed, "The dearth of quality choral materials for changing voices forces some of us into the role of editor/arranger."[48] In an extensive article outlining compositional implications of John Cooksey's research, composer Emily Crocker noted, "The piece that worked so well with last year's group may be completely unsuited to this year's group."[49]

Cooper offered, "unless the tessitura of the printed parts conforms to the actual tessitura of the voices which will sing them, singing parts will get lost and boys particularly will wander in search of any tune their voice can encompass."[50] Sally Herman agreed, stating "Another very important ingredient of successful music reading and rehearsing is to keep all students in the best part of their voice ranges (tessituras) for most of the rehearsal. This is especially true for the male adolescent singer."[51] Shewan cautioned, "A common mistake on the part of many music educators is the selection of music which is easy rhythmically and tonally but demanding in range, tessitura, and dynamics . . . a choir can perform a work of the highest calibre and of great rhythmic and tonal difficulty when the range, tessitura, and dynamic demands are limited."[52]

A number of *MEJ* authors have been critical of how repertoire is rehearsed. Forcucci wrote, "What happens in our rehearsals? The girls learn their parts quickly and sit patiently while the accompanist 'pounds' out the boys' parts. After some time, we feel that the boys have the notes. Now, we put all the parts together and ask the pianist to play the accompaniment. Yes, the boys always seem to get 'off' and the results are disheartening to everyone."[53] He continued, "Our boys, at this time, are making a vocal adjustment, but, more important, are also making a hearing adjustment. This is a very crucial period, one in which we unthinkingly add to the confusion by assigning to them the task of not only singing in tune, but also singing a part which for them is 'somewhere down low' and supported (teacher says) 'somewhere in the piano accompaniment.'"[54]

For this reason, "The teacher in charge of vocal work in the junior high school must be a voice specialist," wrote Wisenall. "He must be more than a trained singer, or teacher of singing to adults. He must understand physiologically both the child and the adolescent voice, and be acquainted with the proper procedure for their training. He must know how to classify children's voices properly. His musicianship must be broad and sound . . . He must possess to a marked degree the power of happy leadership."[55] Evalene Bell stated things a bit more plainly: "To get along with adolescents we must make an effort to understand them and to talk their language . . . Students will forgive a teacher for being almost anything except being deadly dull."[56] Besides fearing dullness, teachers need to know what to teach and when it should be taught. Will Earhart first outlined pedagogy for the boys' changing voice in a 1918 article listing music curriculum guidelines by grade level, with specific attention to grades seven and eight.[57]

Conclusion

In 1931, Walter Butterfield commented that choral teachers "greet the emphasis which is bringing singing in the limelight. Let us keep watch that this enthusiasm and publicity promotes more careful attention to vocal conditions and vocal advancement, so that in the years to come we shall have good singing of good music."[58] Throughout this first century of MENC, the *Music Supervisors' Bulletin,* the *Music Supervisors' Journal,* and the *Music Educators Journal* have chronicled the development of choral music education toward Butterfield's goal of "good singing of good music."

Choral music teachers of today can find much in these words to provide a sense that educators before us have also struggled with providing the best possible music education for adolescent boys and their changing voices. Many of the concerns and controversies of the past have been addressed, and today we can better choose pedagogical approaches that are supported both by research and practice.

We end where we began, with the words of Frances Elliott Clark about the promulgation of music education: "Whenever and wherever you band together and demand these opportunities for your children they will be forthcoming . . . As a vocation, Music is much stronger than anyone would think. We are trying to train the boys to be carpenters and blacksmiths, but there are probably more people earning their living in music in some way, than in either of these trades."[59]

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SIDEBAR

What Do We Know?

Scientific research provides choral teachers with information about the boys' changing voice. The information below is drawn from the research of John Cooksey and the other resources listed below.

1. Boys experience the adolescent voice change in a sequence of stages that occur at varying rates. The result is a predictable progression marked by periods of growth and stabilization.
2. All normally healthy boys progress through the same sequence of stages, with some "rebounding" to higher pitch levels after the final stage. (Ask an adult tenor if he ever had "bass" notes . . . most did!)
3. The hormonal secretions that activate puberty also initiate the process of vocal change. This begins at different times in different boys, as early as ages 9 or 10 and as late as age 14.
4. The first vocal sign is that the upper pitch range becomes unstable and more effortful with a vocal quality that becomes slightly breathy. For most boys, the peak of the voice change (when falsetto begins to emerge) occurs somewhere in the 13th or 14th year. The voice change continues through the college years. One can expect many stages of voice change in groups of seventh grade boys.
5. The best way to assess a boy's voice is to identify the entire vocal range, excluding falsetto. When we only notice the lowest pitches, it may seem as though the change process occurs very quickly. But, the boys' newly acquired low pitches are only part of the change process. Other important factors are tessitura, voice quality, register development, and the average fundamental speaking pitch.
6. Sometimes boys try to sing an octave lower then they're supposed to because they're imitating a female teacher who is singing at the very bottom of her range – with the best of intentions, of course. The reverse often occurs when adult men sing in their falsetto when modeling for treble singers – and the trebles sing an octave higher than expected.
7. The "cracking" in adolescent boys' voices is simply a result of laryngeal muscles growing at different rates. This effect can be somewhat minimized by encouraging boys to sing prior to and throughout the voice change, helping boys adjust to the new vocal techniques required by their developing vocal musculature, and encouraging them to sing with their "new voice" as well as their falsetto when it becomes available to them.
8. Adolescent male voices should not be expected to sound like adult voices. Teachers may consider using labels other than "tenor" and "baritone" to identify parts in printed octavos (many publishers already do this).

(continued)

For More Information

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