

What Voices Have Emerged? Lessons on vocal health and choral tone from a new choral leaflet series

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Abstract

Emerging Voices is a choral leaflet series published by Oxford University Press. The aim of the series is to satisfy a need for appropriate repertoire to cater for adolescent male voices at various stages of change. Part ranges conform to the “cambiata” system developed originally by Irvin Cooper but most recently refined by Alan McClung of the Cambiata Institute of America for Early Adolescent Vocal Music. The first twelve pieces in the series have been recorded by choirs chosen to represent the possible resource groups that might use the series. The choirs ranged from beginner school cambiata groups to the “changing voices” section of a prestigious national youth choir. During the recording process, analytical samples of part-singing were taken in order to answer two research questions:

- Has the series promoted appropriate vocal development and healthy voice use?
- Has it resulted in a choral sound of artistic merit?

Specifically “cambiata” choirs are rare in the UK. Other types of vocal ensemble were of necessity employed for the recordings. These included “male voice” choirs of young tenors and basses, boys’ choirs consisting of higher and lower treble parts or more simply, just “changing voices”. Analytical software as well as perceptual judgement has been employed to evaluate each type of ensemble against the research questions. The paper concludes the Irvin Cooper’s “cambiata” ideal of “fitting the song to the voice, not the voice to the song” can only be truly realized in solo singing instruction. The most difficult part to populate was the Cambiata II part, which covers the least stable phases described in John Cooksey’s adolescent voice transformation scheme. It cannot be assumed that a voice is developing healthily simply because the singer is a member of a cambiata group. Nevertheless, regardless of a choir’s disposition, the use of the cambiata ranges could result in pleasing choral tone and safe singing wherever teachers were skillful and vigilant in allocating voices to parts.