

## The Application of the Reference Book of *Choral Pedagogy* in the “Chorus Foundation” Course in a Non-state-owned Normal College in China

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**Abstract:** There are a series of problems in contemporary normal school chorus courses in China, including the lack of national top-level guidance documents, insufficient professional teachers, insufficient class hours, and misalignment between design of teaching materials and reality. In response to the above problems, the author flexibly applies an English-written book *Choral Pedagogy* as a teaching aid in the “Chorus Foundation” course in a non-state-owned normal college in Shanghai to make up for the chorus teaching content of the existing textbooks. In the course, students have been shown choral pedagogy, scientific singing mechanism, and vocal health etc..

### 1 Introduction

In recent years, chorus has increasingly attracted the attention of schools and other social groups to participate as an activity to foster collectivism, promote cohesion, and enhance music literacy (Luo, 2017). Especially since the sixth Golden Bell Awards in 2007 and the 13th CCTV Youth Song Competition in 2008, the chorus has become more and more influential, leading to the growing demand for talents in chorus music in K-12 and higher education (Li, 2011). Meanwhile, the voice of expanding chorus teaching units and the emphasis on teacher preparation in the instruction in music education of higher normal schools is also on the increase (Li, 2015).

However, the chorus teaching materials for college teachers are in a relatively lagging situation (Li, 2011; Xu, 2009; Zhao, 2004). For example, SATB (of mixed genders) chorus works in the textbooks occupy most part of the pieces, while in reality, the number of females far surpasses males in education majors, which leads to the difficulty of arrangement (Zhao, 2004). In addition, the textbooks are usually organized in the form of “chorus and conducting”, where “conducting” part takes up too much of the “chorus” part, so that the theoretical discourse in the “chorus” part is not enough for systematical instruction.

What’s more, there is a lack of top-level guidance for chorus education in teacher preparation programs in college. At present, the guidance documents on college chorus courses include:

1. “Notice on Printing and Distributing the Syllabus (Draft) for Art Majors in Higher Normal Colleges” issued by the Ministry of Education in 1981;

2. “Teaching Scheme for National Art College Undergraduate Programs” issued by the Ministry of Culture in 1995;
3. “Course Scheme for Music (Painting) Discipline in Teacher Preparation Programs in Second-year (three-year) College (Trial)” issued by the State Education Commission in 1996.

The above three documents were issued during an early period, and no texts were found on the Internet. The present is the “Guidelines for the Undergraduate Courses in Musicology (Teacher Education) of the National Colleges and Universities” issued by the Department of Physical, Health and Arts Education of the Ministry of Education in 2004 (Zhao, 2001; Zhu, 2006). This is designed for the colleges that offer Musicology majors, rather than for teacher preparation majors. Nor is there any specific national teaching scheme guidance for art education majors in non-state-owned normal colleges. Non-state-owned colleges and universities cannot completely copy public higher normal colleges or professional music colleges due to school conditions, teacher resources, students, curriculum settings and other factors. Therefore, the chorus teachers of the non-state-owned colleges have to seek additional teaching reference book to make up for the above deficiencies.

## **2 Literature review**

Thanks to continuous development in the “chorus and conducting” education in China’s normal colleges, some colleges have achieved fruitful awards. For example, the Xinjiang Normal University Conservatory of Music Chorus won three first prizes in the 38th Italian SEGs International Choir Competition, but the current educational status of the “chorus and conducting” course in the high school is not optimistic (Zhu, 2006). The problems include lack of teachers, insufficient class hours, and flaws in teaching materials.

### **2.1 Lack of Professional Teachers Specializing in “Chorus and Conducting”**

The chorus class need professional teachers with high comprehensive quality as well as solid theoretical and practical foundation. However, current “chorus and conducting” courses tend to be taught by vocal teachers, instrumental teachers or theoretical teachers. The lack of excellent teachers leads to the difficulty in ensuring scientific and systematic teaching methods (Zhu,2006).

### **2.2 Insufficient Total Class Hours for “Chorus and Conducting”**

In “Guidelines for the Undergraduate Courses in Musicology (Teacher Education) of the National Colleges and Universities”, it stipulates that the total number of class hours of the “Chorus and Conducting” course is 108 hours for 3 semesters, with 2 credits per semester. However, there is a certain disparity between the guideline and the reality. According to this requirement, only six pieces of works can be rehearsed (Xu, 2009). Due to insufficient hours, many aspects of knowledge and practical training are not covered, which leads to the lack of theoretical and practical development for students. Thus, some students will only be able to sing as a choral member instead of teaching chorus members how to sing, failing to adapt to the actual needs of future work (Xu, 2009).

### 2.3 Lack of Systematic Choral Vocal Training in the Content of Textbooks

The scientific method of vocalization is the basis of choral singing, but relevant explanation and training in textbooks is far from sufficient and fail to play its due role. The beauty of the chorus members' tone directly affects the quality of the performance. There is a certain difference between the chorus and the solo. It is impossible to completely copy the solo vocal music training, which attaches importance to the signing formant. It must also cover SATB (of mixed genders) sound training, harmony and pitch practice, and sound uniformity training, etc..(Xu, 2009). The correct choral singing method needs to avoid the timbre of solo singing while emphasizing the meshing with other choral members. Moreover, the teacher should consider characteristics of different students' voices, illustrate scientific singing mechanism and coordinating the timbres of the choral members, to make the tone mellow and soft, the voice accurate and harmonious, and the sound balanced and colorful(Tan, 2015).

### 3 The Application of the Book *Choral Pedagogy* in the “Chorus Foundation” Course in a Non-state-owned Normal College

*Choral Pedagogy* is logically organized with detailed explanation as well as simple language. The illustration and accompanying exercises provide excellent resources for choral conducting and teaching. The authors are Dr. Brenda Smith and Dr. Robert T. Sataloff, both of whom have D.M.A degrees, the latter of whom is also a M.D.. The book aims to build a bridge between choral conductors and choral members, so that both sides can understand the principles of choral pedagogy as well as vocal science, and apply them to the study and performance of choral music. The book's content incorporates knowledge of vocal pedagogy, choral conducting, and vocal sciences, as well as many exercises and specific techniques to help develop healthy choral voices.

From September 2017 to January 2018, the author taught the “Chorus Foundation” course for two classes of sophomores majored in art education, imparting the knowledge of vocal pedagogy, choral conducting and vocal science from the *Choral Pedagogy* book in an 80 minutes period class each week. Each class period is divided into four sections: warm-up (10 minutes), choral works learning and rehearsal (40 minutes), finishing exercises (10 minutes), and group presentation performances (20 minutes).

The warm-up session includes relaxation, singing posture, breathing, and resonance. The choral works learning and rehearsal section covers some of classical choral works and excerpts, including multi-voice rhythm training, multi-voice sight singing exercises, and cappella exercises. Works lists include “SON CUBANO”, “Bim Bam”, “HAVA NASHINA” and “Picking Lotus”, “Summer Twilight” and “Moon, Moonlight”, the latter three of which are Chinese traditional folk music. The part of learning choral works mainly aims to train the students' auditory sense in the multi voices and aesthetics in the balance of the choral sounds and acquaint them with the singing requirements of the works and choral vocal theories. The fourth section is the group presentation, where students demonstrates their

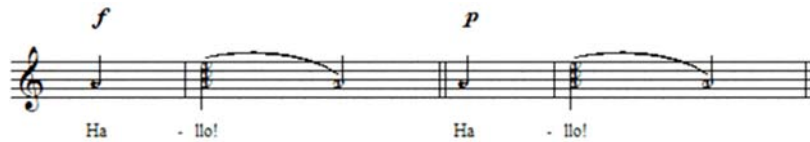
finished performance assignments, so that the teacher knows students' learning progress, and design the supplementary content for the next week.

In the process of applying *Choral Pedagogy's* content to the class instruction, the author gradually summarized the core content into the following aspects.

First of all, students have to bear in mind that they will be the conductor in the future, leading and teaching a choir of K-12 students. This mission requests them to reflect on the current teacher's instruction method and choral training approach from the standpoint of conductors so as to inspire K-12 student chorus in the days to come.

For example, when illustrating the contrast of "f" and "p" based on the following "Hello" score at class,

Fig.1. Contrast of "f" and "p" Exercise



the teacher let the students imagine the valley echo, so that students would relate this knowledge to their own experience. After class, students should be able to draw inferences. Therefore, teachers added new dynamic markers or change the position of the dynamic markers in the same score like Figure 2, 3, and 4, so that they could rehearse with group members to understand the responsibilities and tasks under different roles.

Fig.2. Contrast of "p" and "f" Exercise



Fig.3 Diminuendo and Crescendo Exercise 1



Fig.4 Diminuendo and Crescendo Exercise 2



What's more, students have to be aware of vocal pedagogy and choral pedagogy. As for the vocal pedagogy, this

book reviews various schools from ancient Greece to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, among which the author introduced Manuel Carcia fils, Lilli Lemann, and Duprez and others' important theories on vocal performances and teaching practice related to the physics, acoustics, and physiology, such as the Bernoulli effect, the singing formant, and the construction of vocal cords. So that students could broaden the knowledge of vocal pedagogy and developed correct concept of vocalization.

For example, the first technical problem in singing is how to have a good attack. How to make the vocal cords produce a scientific, physiologically close vibration with the breath in the process of attacking requires the usage of Bernoulli effect, closely related to the closure of the vocal cords (Vernard,1967).

As for the choral pedagogy, this book has covered three aspects -- choral voice training, choral singing techniques and choral diction, which systematically comprised a choral course or a complete rehearsal process. A complete choral rehearsal activity should include three aspects: the warm-up process, the rehearsal process, and the finishing practice. First, the warm-up process is subdivided into four steps: relaxation, singing posture, breathing and resonance. Secondly, the rehearsal process is to practice choral singing skills, diction, and multi-voice coordination. Finally, the finishing relaxation practice, opposite to the warm-up process, functions through soft sigh, closing eyes meditatively, listening to the piano, and slowly stretching limbs etc., so that the voice can be relaxed and gradually restored to the state of speaking.

For example, the first part of the choral warm-up process is relaxation, which means to relax the large and small muscle groups in turn. The relaxation of large muscles can be accompanied with the music with strong rhythm to stretch the limbs. The small muscles are relaxed on the face, tongue and chin. For example, one starts with making an angry expression while holding his fist, and then stretches the facial sense organs to a smile. During the whole relaxation, one remains seated throughout the whole session, which will reduce the tension of the choral members, transitioning from the normal state to a more excited singing state, with attention being focused.

Finally, vocal health shall be emphasized. Since a choral class period or a complete rehearsal lasts for nearly 80 minutes, compared as a singing marathon, such long-term voice training is likely to cause fatigue vocal cords and even various vocal diseases. Hence, the teacher ought to explain the formation and prevention of voice diseases (such as hoarseness, vocal cord nodules), and related unfavorable diet and lifestyle such as smoking, staying up late and drinking alcohol.

#### **4 Conclusion**

In summary, the book *Choral Pedagogy* makes up for the shortcomings-- lack of choral teaching methods in the existing textbooks, and enriches the content of the "Chorus Foundation", broadens the learning and teaching materials for teachers, systematize instructional steps, provides various interactional teaching methods, reduces the stress of students' long-period choral singing, and pave the way for students' further learning on choral singing and

conducting.

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