Coordinating Vocal Colors in Women’s Choruses

As equal voice ensembles, women’s choruses can create vibrant sonorities. Disparities between voice size and color, musicianship, temperament, learning style, and life experience all impact ensemble unity. Teaching singers to coordinate (rather than blend) vocal colors encourages them to shade and integrate unique timbres without neutralizing them. Mindfulness, relatedness, position, and part distribution all come into play.

I. EQUAL VOICES
Alto/soprano classification – viewing all members as singers

Factors influencing self-perceived voice part classifications
- Range: accessing all registers, upper/lower/mixed
- Assigned by other: decided by teacher or choral director
- Comfort: history, familiarity, past labeling
- Self-knowledge: capabilities, possibilities, understanding typical tessitura/function
- Openness: willingness to try something different – growth/challenge

Voice part assignments
Sources of information for conductors
- Auditions
- Singer’s desire / self-assessment (with teacher guidance/input)
- Personnel for that year/concert
- Repertoire (sometimes chosen in light of personnel from previous years)

II. INDIVIDUAL VOICES
Audition sheets with “voice quality” rated 1-10. What does this mean?

Two models for defining vocal color characteristics

1) X/Y Graph (Zabriskie referencing Bentley)

2) “Paired comparative words” – voices fall on a continuum between sets of opposites (McCoy, 2012)
THREE COLOR TYPES (base or “default” color – impacted by experience and instruction)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Color category</th>
<th>Pastel</th>
<th>Neon</th>
<th>Rich</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>attributes</td>
<td>light/pure</td>
<td>bright/clear</td>
<td>dark/warm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>potential fault</td>
<td>breathy</td>
<td>nasal</td>
<td>swallowed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>archetypes</td>
<td>Barbara Cook</td>
<td>Sarah Brightman</td>
<td>Leontyne Price</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>classic/contemporary</td>
<td>Keli O’Hara</td>
<td>Kristen Chenoweth</td>
<td>Christine Aguilera</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

III. VOICES TOGETHER

Three options for achieving unified choral sound
1) Selective auditions – choose a particular kind of voice (screen others out)
2) Require conformity to singular model or “ideal sound” (determined by conductor)
3) Celebrate the unique diversity of color (different every season/year) by arranging and coordinating these individual colors into a collectively complimentary sound

Coordinating vocal colors

**Singer’s SELF-awareness** – recognizing/embracing natural timbre

**Shading** – adjusting placement
“placement meter” – five resonance factors (Zabriskie)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shade</th>
<th>Brightness</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>chiaro</td>
<td>bright</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chiaro/chiaroscuro</td>
<td>brightish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chiaroscuro</td>
<td>bright/dark</td>
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<tr>
<td>chiaroscuro/oscuro</td>
<td>darkish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oscuro</td>
<td>dark</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

“**Blending**” – problematic term – what singers can do to impact “blend”

**Singer’s OTHER-awareness** (mindfulness, role, standing positions, part distribution)

III. PEOPLE TOGETHER

**Variables:** musicianship + temperament + learning style + life experience

**CONNECT**
come to know one another

**COLLABORATE**
“it’s about us” – co-laboring

**COMMUNICATE**
with each other and with conductor

Challenges to community: outsiders, insiders, newcomers, “weakest link”