calm. Stress apparently did not affect them.

- Learn the difference between being positive and negative with people in choirs. If we directors accentuate the positive and look for the good, our stress level will be much lower, and our choirs will emulate our attitude and perform with less stress and more confidence.

- Forgive someone. Too many of us carry grudges for things that happened in the past. On tour two years ago, I took a choir through Oxford, Mississippi where we were given a bus tour of the town. It became apparent that the guide still bore a grudge against the northern states in regards to the Civil War. She spoke of it as if it had happened last month!

- Is there someone in your life whom you need to forgive—a former friend, a spouse, a pastor, an in-law, a child? Actively forgive that person. Let go of the feelings of resentment. From experience, I know that the stress and mental baggage related to a memory will fade.

- Wrap up unfinished business. All of us have loose ends in our lives. In my situation, I decided that one of the most stressful factors in my life was the fact that I had not yet completed my doctorate. I had even thought about giving up on the process altogether! That thought produced more stress. Last October, I made the decision to finish the degree and am now getting closer each and every day to completion. I know that the “weight” will lift when the doctorate is finished and that the effort I am putting forth now is worth the struggle.

- Take a look at your life. Is there unfinished business? If so, make a concerted effort at completing the task (s) because the stress lifted from you will be considerable.

- Strive to improve your spiritual life. It is important! As a church music director, I am surprised that I sometimes have to remind myself to work on/improve my spiritual life. How odd is it that I need a reminder? I work in a church. The fact is that stress-relieving power comes from quiet prayer and from believing in a divine being, something greater than oneself.

There is no pillow so soft as a clear conscience.
—French Proverb

Assessment in the Choral Classroom—New Options Using Technology

by Trisha Scheidies
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(Used with permission of Indiana’s ICDA Notations, Vol. 34, No. 2, Winter 2012-13)

Data and assessment are two words I hear frequently at staff and department meetings in my school district. For some aspects of our choral music curriculum, this isn’t a problem. For example, creating and administering an evaluation of my students’ knowledge of basic music theory concepts is rather easy. A simple pencil and paper activity will do the trick, and I can administer the evaluation to every student simultaneously. Similarly, I can give dictation quizzes to an entire class and evaluate them with little difficulty.

Vocal assessments are a completely different animal, and until this year, I did not like giving them. But I loved having the
opportunity to hear each student individually and to give helpful feedback.

In my way of thinking, assessments are a key to creating independent, confident singers, which will in turn create a confident and successful ensemble. I hated assessments because, without an assistant or student teacher, I had no choice but to stop teaching for two days or more and create worksheets for the students not being assessed, thereby creating more work for me.

While serving on our district curriculum committee last year, I realized that, with the looming RISE requirements and our new district-wide rubric, I had to come up with another way to administer the assessments. I hope you will find the following ideas useful.

**Formal Assessments**

For all vocal assessments this year, I am required to use a district-wide choral music rubric based on state standards which include learning targets within each standard.

For each vocal assessment, I select the standards and learning targets to be assessed. In doing this, I focus on specific skills, e.g., sight reading, and can pinpoint areas of strength and weakness for the students. I give the singers the rubric and then place the music excerpt on which they will be evaluated on the back of the rubric. I make notes on the score which, in turn, helps students see exactly what was performed incorrectly.

Administering the test is much easier than previously. Gone are the days of stopping class instruction for two days. Instead, I send the students, one at a time, to a practice room with a Roland Edirol wave/mp3 recorder, and they record themselves singing the excerpt. Our accompanist records the accompaniment on our new recorder, and I upload it to my computer in our rehearsal room.

In rehearsals, we spend several days singing with the recording in preparation for individual assessment. Because this was my first attempt to use this technology, I asked a few student leaders, adept at all things technological, to record each singer’s “performance.” Next time, I will ask each singer to record him/herself in the practice room. Of course, listening to and evaluating each singer in the comfort of my home while sipping a Pepsi works quite well!

Another approach to vocal assessment without losing rehearsal time doesn’t require students to leave the rehearsal room. Blue Microphone sells a product called a Mikey, a small microphone that turns your iPod or iPhone into a portable recording device. With this tool, you can pass the iPod and plugged-in Mikey to each member of a section who then sings/records her part while others are also rehearsing.

Pick one section of the choir and a short section of one choral work. Rehearse that particular part with the entire class. This approach allows for flexibility in which section of the choir is to be tested and which music will be assessed.

Spreading the assessment over several days allows you to devote time to other activities during the class period. In addition, you can spread the listening/grading process, which can feel overwhelming, over several days.

**Informal Assessments**

With 6th graders, I employed a simple assessment which became a part of our warm-up activity. This year we began using the Takadimi rhythm system. Each student was asked to compose a four-beat pattern and perform it for the class. I grouped students into pairs and had them create the four-beat pattern as a call and response. Each pair performed its “composition” for the class.

I was able to quickly and easily assess each student’s ability to keep a steady beat, create a four-beat pattern and perform it with Takadimi syllables. In my grade book, I notated the results with one of three symbols: a check mark, check mark with a plus sign, or check mark with a minus.

After each pair performed its call-and-response using the Takadimi syllables—this took up about 20 minutes split into two days—I was able to work briefly with those students who struggled. While each pair performed, other students in the class had to keep the beat and make sure that each person performed a complete four-beat pattern.

If someone did not complete a four-beat pattern, class members would make buzzing noises—think the buzzer from the board game, Taboo. This exercise was fun and kept everyone involved and engaged in the activity. In fact the only person...
that got buzzed was me. I purposely performed an incorrect example!

Initially, I was nervous about trying these new assessments, but I was thrilled with the results. Minimal class time was lost with both the informal and formal assessments, and I gained useful data that has informed my classroom instruction. I encourage you to think outside the box and challenge yourself to try what I have suggested or create your own assessments. You’ll be pleased. I know I was!

To be true to ourselves, we must be true to others.

—Jimmy Carter

Reflections from the Soprano Sight Singing Room at Contest

by

Cathy Crispino Lawrence, Kansas
with Marie Lerner-Sexton, Olathe, Kansas
(Used with permission of Kansas’ Choral Range, Vol. 34, No. 1, Spring 2013)

Having taught for 32 years, I have amassed a large collection of sight singing materials. It was as if they were pieces from a jigsaw puzzle, but when I tried to put them into place, they didn’t quite fit, or one or two pieces were missing. I felt like it was a never-ending search until a particular missing piece showed itself one Saturday in November.

While judging soprano sight singing district auditions for the Northeast Kansas Music Educators Association, I heard everything—some students doing well; some doing poorly. While it’s usually not a good sign when silence begins a sight singing audition, there were a few students who used the practice time to hear the music in their heads, audiate it. No singing through aloud—just silence!

I was stunned the first time the silence-only practice segment was followed by a young woman “nailing” the sight singing exercise using solfege. Then, it happened again. I became a believer in the utility and dependability of audiation!

Developed by Edwin Gordon, Music Learning Theory teaches us that students must have musical patterns in their ears (inner hearing without exterior sound) before they can recognize the patterns in written form. Gordon coined the term audiation for this specialized inner hearing in 1975. More information on his foundational work, especially audiation, is available at the Gordon Institute of Music Learning website, www.giml.org.

Gordon’s recent research involves infants from one to eighteen months of age. If interested in practical applications of his work, you can contact Dr. Anne Meeker Miller, music therapist with the Blue Valley School District, Overland Park, KS, at www.babysingandsign.com.

After observing the results in the soprano sight singing room that day, I began incorporating audiation exercises into our choir’s routine on a regular basis. And the students’ sight singing improved!

Then, I met Carol Krueger, Director of Choral Activities at Emporia State University (KS), a teacher who has zeroed in on all the sight singing elements and knows how to put them together to complete what, for me, had been a puzzle. Her book, Progressive Sight Singing, is rooted in Edwin Gordon’s work and is published by Oxford University Press.

If you haven’t observed the Emporia State University choir in rehearsal, you should. Dr. Krueger is a master teacher with extensive public school teaching experience. At Emporia State, students are engaged in the rehearsal process in new and exciting ways. Her students move to the music and use Curwen hand signs as they sing and physically shape phrases even in the early stages of learning a new work. The energy and sense of teamwork with the choir are remarkable.

How does all of this activity happen? There is an answer! First, ears (audiation), then eyes with bodies engaged and moving from the beginning of the entire learning process.