

Help, I'm not an Alto!

An explanation of why choirs sometimes ask singers to join a voice part which is not their usual one, and the occasions when we don't.

A problem faced by choral directors everywhere is how to allocate parts to individual singers in order to create a balanced choral sound using the singers available. Because of the physical nature of the larynx, there will be more baritones and second sopranos than anything else. How do we create enough tenors and altos? Any sort of shoe-horning of people into less appropriate voice parts needs to be looked at carefully, so that we balance the needs of the choir with the more important needs of the individual.

Firstly, it helps to have a brief look at the way the larynx works, in order to find out what happens when we ask it to go outside its normal comfort zone. The larynx has opposing sets of muscles (like nearly all muscle groups in the body) which work against each other in order to raise and lower the pitch. In every voice, there will be a range of pitches within which the laryngeal muscles are most comfortable, where they can operate for the longest time without tiring. An easy way to locate this is to listen to the speaking voice of a singer. If the speaking task is relatively monotonous (days of the week, months of the year, counting) then the pitch of the voice will settle into an average comfortable pitch. You can locate this by quietly humming along with the speaker and then matching the pitch to a note on the piano.

Once you have the average speaking pitch, you can be fairly sure that the lowest comfortable singing note will be about a third below this. So – from this we can deduce that the larynx is at its happiest near to the bottom of its pitch range. This doesn't mean that it's wrong to try and extend it; that's why we learn vocal technique, in order to do this comfortably, safely and with exciting results.

The next job is to work out what is the most comfortable singing range of the individual. This is a bit more tricky. Young voices, pre-puberty, will be soprano or alto; again, second sopranos are most common. Deciding on which part is best is mostly to do with overall comfort; look out for pushing or straining either at the top or at the bottom, or listen to where the voice is happiest to project the sound without over-working and you will have a good idea of voice type.

Girls

As girls mature through their teens, their voices become richer and sometimes lower (occasionally higher). Often they stay on a particular voice part either out of habit, or because they are musically reliable within this part. Regular re-evaluation is very

important here. So why do we often ask girls to sing alto when they are normally sopranos? This can be unpopular with the girls involved and so there has to be a very powerful argument in order to justify it. The basic answer is that, without this, there will be no choir.

So what happens to the voice when we ask sopranos to sing lower? We know already that the muscles of the larynx are happiest operating in the lower pitches. The singer may not be able to project the sound efficiently, the sound quality may be reduced or compromised, but most importantly – there is no harm done. This means no harm in the short term - voice loss or tiring, and no harm in the longer term - maturation into adult singing. For many girls of this age, some practice using the lower register (speech quality) in a balanced way, which allows integration with the middle and upper registers, is essential in order to enable the richness of the middle range to develop. For others it may not be ideal, but it's certainly the best compromise all round.

Boys

Boys are, however, far more complicated. The changes during adolescence are much more radical and need to be more carefully monitored and accommodated. There is information elsewhere on this website about how to recognise changing voices and how to allocate the appropriate vocal part. This article is just going to deal with the compromise element – changing voices don't fit neatly into any of the SATB voice parts.

The first issue to deal with is the one where boys continue to sing high when their speaking voice is dropping. It's often tempting to do this, boys with good vocal technique can often produce a strong and musical soprano range, even when their speaking voice would suggest young baritone. This is because the larynx is still flexible at this point, the cartilages are growing rapidly but are still softer than adult larynx cartilages (the 'box' part of the voice-box). The muscles carry on with their habitual use, even though they are growing much longer. The problem here is that the demands on the larynx become more and more extreme. If the boy continues to sing soprano during voice change, at some point the whole system will collapse and the boy will have a wobbly few months vocally, regardless of any potential problems later.

There has been scientific research into this, some in the US, Germany, Sweden, Australia and some in the UK. The considerations have been for both short-term and long-term development. *All of the research concludes that boys should not sing exclusively in the upper ranges during voice change.*

Notice that I refer to exclusive use of the upper range. Occasional use is fine, in fact it can encourage flexibility in the upper ranges. So it's ok for young tenors to sing

some notes in falsetto. It's ok for all adolescent boys to use falsetto in their warming-up, and it is often an artistic requirement from time to time in pop or musical theatre singing. What is crucial is that the main body of the singing with a rapidly-growing and vulnerable voice is within the fundamental comfort zone – at the lower end of the pitch range.

Hopefully this will have clarified some of the arguments here. Compromise is never easy but nearly always necessary when asking individuals to form a cohesive group.