

The Importance of Singing in ALL Music Classes

Marina McLerran

It is the goal of a professional musician to make playing an instrument or singing look effortless. This can only be achieved with years of intensive study and a well-developed ear. Teaching band and orchestra students how to sing will likely positively affect their aural skills, emotional health, confidence, and marketability.

What are aural skills?

Ear training is one of the most important aspects of music education since all musicians require the ability to hear and evaluate their performance. Individuals who select a music-related major in college will be required to take multiple semesters of an aural skills class (sometimes titled “sight-singing”) in order to perfect their “inner-ear.” David Loberg Code from the Western Michigan University School of Music describes aural skills studies as “a means of developing crucial musicianship skills.” He elaborates that the four main goals of this course are to enable students to understand what they hear, to hear what they see, to make corrections, and to better internalize music. It is necessary for music educators to first be able to look at a score and predict how it is supposed to sound in order to “detect and correct discrepancies” in rehearsals (Code), just as a professional performer must be constantly checking and re-checking their tuning and accuracy.

Professor Code shares that singing is beneficial because of its ability to strengthen one’s “inner performance” with “something concrete and physical.”

Creston Herron, Director of the award-winning Klein High School Orchestra (Klein, TX), believes that “kids will play as well as you expect them to” and that regular singing exercises help “to internalize pitch and improve aural skills.” These two musical concepts, he described as “equally important as the kinesthetic part of playing an instrument.” Herron explained that when students “understand what their function is” (within the harmonic structure), they are more likely to listen to the whole chord across the ensemble, rather than focusing only on their individual playing. Debbie Martin, the music instructor at Canyon Creek Elementary School (Austin, TX), also agrees that “instrumentalists who can sing on pitch are much more likely to play their instrument in tune” and requires all of her K-5 students to learn to use their voice. She also points out the benefits of learning proper posture, breath support, and how to balance with others through regular ensemble singing; three additional skills employed by all musicians.

Additional Benefits of Singing

Besides developing a stronger “inner ear,” singing in class also supports students’ emotional development and

leads to more confident musicians. Stacy Horn of *Time* magazine cites a 2005 study that yielded the conclusion that, regardless of tone quality, ensemble singing “can produce satisfying and therapeutic sensations” that may alleviate the effects of anxiety or stress. Horn cites several instances where researchers have examined the release of various anti-stress hormones, like oxytocin and endorphins, that occurred during a vocal performance. Oxytocin is a hormone that controls elements of the reproductive system and multiple human behaviors including recognition, trust-building, and management of anxiety (Society of Endocrinology). Endorphins are neurotransmitters, or “brain chemicals,” which “function to transmit electrical signals within the nervous system” (Stoppler). Once released, these chemicals act to alleviate feelings of pain or stress and can also boost the immune system (Stoppler).

In a 2017 study completed by Nicola Swain (Dunedin School of Medicine, New Zealand) and Sally Bodkin-Allen (Southern Institute of Technology, Invercargill), it was determined that a positive correlation exists between regular participation in vocal performance and increased self-confidence. For the purposes of the experiment, forty music educators who “self-identified as uncertain singers” were asked to regularly participate in either Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)

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or group singing (Swain, Bodkin-Allen). While both therapies resulted in “significant improvements in singing confidence,” the group singing method “outperformed ACT on an overall rating of improvement in self-perceived tone-deafness” (Swain, Bodkin-Allen). Martin shares that singing is perhaps a superior form of therapy or community-building, since “you can do it anywhere and any time” without any equipment or cost. She uses regular voice-training to encourage her students to express their feelings and “be confident in their voices” and themselves.

Teaching instrumentalists to sing also enhances their marketability, should they choose to pursue music as a career. Skilled instrumentalists can make themselves more desirable to future college programs and employers by developing basic vocal abilities. In recent decades, there has also been a noticeable movement towards instrumental

compositions that include a vocal or auxiliary part. More often, all levels of band students are expected to sing, snap, clap, or stomp in regular concert repertoire. Examples of this rising trend include *Agincourt Hymn* by Daniel Bukvich, *Echoes of the Morning Trumpet* by John Prescott, and *Purgatorio* by Robert W. Smith. It is our responsibility, as educators, to properly equip our students for a career in music and give them a myriad of tools to make them as distinguishable from their peers as possible.

Implementing a Vocal Routine

Several directors of instrumental ensembles are hesitant to introduce singing into their classrooms for a variety of reasons—limited rehearsal time, doubts about the validity of singing lessons to instrumentalists, or a lack of confidence in their own abilities. However, Melodianne

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Mallow, a distinguished clinician at the 2017 Texas Bandmasters Association Convention, said it best when she emphasized that directors “don’t have the time *NOT* to” teach strong fundamentals from the very beginning; ear training and self-awareness must be a priority for all levels of musicians.

In my own limited teaching experience, getting beginner band students to sing has taken very little convincing and has yielded musicians with heightened self-awareness, especially when it comes to tuning. Over the course of the school year (their first in band), I make it a point to have students periodically hum the tuning note (concert F) for intervals in between playing it. As the band’s warm up exercises become more advanced (for example, the Remington exercise), they are asked to hum more complex patterns of notes. It is important to explain to students regularly that, in order to achieve the highest level of musicianship, it is necessary to engage as many parts of the brain as possible during practice; getting them into the mindset that singing is something all musicians do.

About getting his high school orchestra students to sing, Mr. Herron shared that, assuming the students studied pitch-matching and solfege in elementary music, “you’re tapping into pre-existing knowledge (and an existing comfort level)” by employing these lessons in the ensemble setting. As part of their daily warm up, Herron requires his students to sing their major scales with the proper solfege (and coordinating hand signs) in thirds. The main focus of this exercise is tuning and a clear understanding of the function of each pitch within a chord. Herron also puts great emphasis on having clear intentions when it comes to phrasing and style, saying, “students will play it how they sing it.” Klein orchestra students are required to learn the words to a work or assign a plot to pieces without lyrics. Herron believes that

“words add imagery” which can make determining phrase endings or studying a new style more accessible.

At the elementary level, Ms. Martin explains that she uses a significant amount of echo singing and repetition to get students started. She employs the Kodaly Concept (http://kodaly.hu/zoltan_kodaly/kodaly_concept) which introduces the use of solfege in accessible intervals and becomes increasingly more difficult “when students are developmentally ready.” She reminds educators that the most important thing “is to make singing fun and to allow students to build confidence in their voices by using singing games and activities that encourage them to love and appreciate making music.”

Sources

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Originally from Austin, TX, Marina McLerran is a clarinetist, music educator, and writer. After graduating from Stephen F. Austin State University in 2014 with a degree in Music Education, she served as an assistant band director in eastern Texas, where she primarily worked with middle and high school-aged students. In the summer of 2019, McLerran relocated to Miami, FL to begin earning a Masters of Music Education from the Frost School of Music at the University of Miami. In addition to her work for the McLerran Journal, McLerran has had her writing published in the Kansas Music Review (Kansas Music Educators Association), the Bandmasters Review (Texas Bandmasters Association), and the Florida Music Director (Florida Music Educators Association). She is also a charter member of the East Texas Chamber Winds, a non-profit group dedicated to the performance of “harmoniemusik”, established in 2016. By founding the McLerran Journal, she hopes to create a valuable reference for her fellow educators and encourage a spirit of learning.