

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

“Music is our oldest form of expression, older than language or art; it begins with the voice, and with our overwhelming need to reach out to others.”¹

Yehudi Menuhin and Curtis W. Davis

While singing is often the most common music activity in the classroom, it poses special problems in task construction as administered by the National Education Monitoring Project (NEMP) in 1996. The aim of the focus is to identify these difficulties, suggest possible improvements and to consider the information which can be obtained by reviewing the videos and raw data.

There will be three areas of focus:

- A study of relatively inaccurate intonation
- Coping with an uncomfortable pitch level
- Pitching the first note

The first chapter is concerned with the role of singing in people’s lives and why students should be taught to sing. For some it offers a means of self-expression and communication; for others it might be central to religious beliefs or certain rites of passage. The physical benefits associated with singing are also important. For example many pedagogues espouse the idea that developing a singing technique improves the quality of one’s speaking voice; others believe that learning to support the vocal sound with the diaphragm teaches one to relax. There are also the therapeutic effects of sound and music on a person’s well-being, and singing is the simplest means of music-making to achieve that desired result. Arnold Bentley describes the voice as “the most intimately controlled, and, well used, the most beautiful of musical instruments. It is the easily portable, and incidentally, the cheapest. If all our other instruments were taken away there could still be music.”²

Providing a child is not afflicted with physical disabilities such as hearing loss, all children have the potential to sing. However many students experience difficulties in developing their singing voices. A very young child might be physically unable to co-ordinate certain muscles, while an older child in the primary school may have difficulties with pitch and intonation. These difficulties might be associated with tessitura, or an inability to perceive pitch and interpret it with the vocal mechanism.

Many students in the intermediate schools will be at the onset of puberty. This is sometimes associated with a loss of self-esteem which induces a lack of self-confidence. As a result many students may feel inhibited about singing. There are also the physical changes that occur with puberty. This might cause difficulties for boys especially with the changes in their voices.

¹ *The Music of Man*, Yehudi Menuhin and Curtis W. Davis, p. 1.

² *Music in Education*, Arnold Bentley (NFER Publishing Company Ltd. Windsor, Berks. Great Britain, 1975), p. 32.

Controversy still exists whether boys with changing voices should cease to sing until their vocal mechanism is stable, or whether they should continue to sing right through the changes. Many boys of this age will experience fluctuations in their ability to pitch in certain tessituras. Some pedagogues believe that music teachers should adapt to the boys' changing voices, by encouraging them to sing in different registers according to their vocal needs. For girls the changes are less drastic, but they often lose tonal ability in their singing voices and the higher registers tend to be weak. Consequently tessitura is an issue for both genders at the intermediate level. In chapter three these different points are discussed in more detail.

Evaluations offer a means of assessing a student's level of musical achievement or potential. They can help music educators to gauge a student's progress or potential. Sometimes they are the only means available for admitting students' entry to a University or a school of Music. Arnold Bentley cites Colwell: "man adapts to and overcomes his environment by constantly saying to himself 'How am I doing?' then 'How can I do better?' The second question is essential for progress, but it is always preceded by the first question, and that is evaluation."¹ Chapter three focuses on the need for evaluating musical ability and different means of testing.

Chapter four is devoted to the analysis of the NEMP videos in this sample and the concluding chapter offers discussion and recommendations based on the results of the analysis.

¹ Music in Education, Arnold Bentley (NFER Publishing Company Ltd. Windsor, Berks. Great Britain, 1975), p.70.