

**From the Judge's Chair**

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**10 Quick Fixes for Any Choir**



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From the Judge's Chair: 10 Quick Fixes for Any Choir  
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### **The Issues**

1. Scared Sopranos
2. Amazonian Altos and the Antithesis
3. Tense Tenors
4. Wimpy Woofers (basses)
5. Loud Leaders
6. Diction Dictators
7. Dynamic Doldrums
8. Stylistic Stasis
9. The Zombie Zone
10. Historical Hiccups

### **The Fixes**

Quickest approaches are listed first. If they don't work, proceed to the next or use them in combination.

1. Scared Sopranos  
Symptom: Undersinging and inappropriate "space" in the passagio and/or upper register can result in compromised tone, balance and pitch.  
Solution: Whoops and opera speak in the appropriate register; then sing
  
2. Amazonian Altos and the Antithesis  
Symptom: Inappropriate mix of chest voice in vocal production (too much OR too little) can result in compromised balance, pitch and choral sound.  
Solution:
  1. Instruct the altos to listen to see if they can hear all three other parts
  2. Instruct them to match the soprano sound
  3. Vocalize them both down and up through the lower register change to facilitate evenness through the range

3. Tense Tenors

Symptom: Off-the-breath (and even on-the-breath), tight vocal production can result in pressed tone, compromised pitch and compromised choral sound.

Solution: 1. Instruct them to sing like men and/or on lip trills  
2. Coffee can contrast (tight, loose) with mezzo forte dynamic  
3. “L” on the chin  
4. For those not mixing up to upper register, “oo” forces head voice to help them feel where to change

4. Wimpy Woofers (basses)

Symptom: Undersinging (or oversinging) and back vocal production can result in unnaturally dark tone, compromised pitch and compromised choral sound.

Solution: 1. Instruct them to sing like men and/or on lip trills  
2. “Zingy, zingy” – model and contrast; have rest of choir respond  
3. Instruct them to meet the tenors half way in matching the tone

5. Loud Leaders

Symptom: Oversinging and out of proportion volume can result in strident tone and compromised balance, choral sound.

Solution: As the whole choir becomes more familiar with the piece (and ALWAYS in your warm-ups/vocalises) ask the choir members to LISTEN to ascertain that they are singing the same volume as their neighbors, some must sing louder and some must sing softer.

6. Diction Dictators

Symptom: Unvoiced consonants (t, k, p) that are out of context can result in intelligible (or unintelligible) text at the expense of tone, style and sensitivity, as well as oversinging.

Solution: The director must work on appropriate enunciation throughout the rehearsal process: first out of context in vocalises and then AS the text of the piece is learned. Voiced consonants are usually more responsible for creating appropriately intelligible text than unvoiced, and require length rather than accent for clear enunciation. No asking for “more diction!” at the dress rehearsal.

7. Dynamic Doldrums

Symptom: Students don’t demonstrate a dynamic range broader than mezzo piano to mezzo forte.

Solution: 1. Be mindful of this situation yourself – dynamics can compact/default after a piece is learned/memorized – and ask for louder/softer singing  
2. Be sure your conducting reflects what you want dynamically

3. Incorporate vocalises with dynamic contrast
4. Use numbers to measure out crescendos and diminuendos and to refer to volume levels in the pieces
5. Motivate the dynamics/shapes with the expressive essence of the work/phrase

8. Stylistic Stasis

Symptom: Lack of variety in programming (or performing) with regard to tempo, mood, mode, volume, vocal approach etc, results in vocal and aural weariness.

Solution:

1. Consider the shape of the program and incorporate varied literature for educational value and appeal, for you and the students in rehearsal and for your audience in performance
2. Consider the different expressive demands of each piece and prepare your ensemble to sing each piece with the appropriate stylistic approach (use recordings and/or clinicians if you feel uncomfortable as you continue to educate your stylistic sense)

9. The Zombie Zone

Symptom: Most students sing without apparent expressive commitment.

Solution:

1. Educate students about the historical and cultural context of the text and music
2. Allow rehearsal time to share your own connection with the text and music
3. Allow time and a safe space for students to articulate their connection with the music
4. Ask them to sing as if they believe they can change someone's life with their music
5. Don't overprogram – just because you have 16 singers doesn't mean you should do 16-part music. Choristers who are insecure will sing with poor tone, breath energy and expressive commitment. More accessible music sung well is way better for all parties involved than difficult music sung in a mediocre or poor fashion.

10. Historical Hiccups

Symptom: 1. No works that were composed/arranged before 1950 are on the program.

Solution: Program historical works and then sing them well! If we don't expose our students to the great works of our art, how will they be passed down to the next generation? We are aiding in the obsolescence of our art form.

If you are uncomfortable with them

- ask friends for help, listen to recordings, invite clinicians
- try SOMETHING, if you don't like it, then change it