Letters to the Editor

Dear Editor:

In response to Sandi Gesler's article on “Non-Auditioned Choirs in the Middle School,” I say, “nog wash.” Obviously, Ms. Gesler is a member of the “feel good school of music.” That is the school of thought that music is really teaching self-esteem, and teaching self-esteem is more important than teaching music correctly. What other subject says it is okay to be wrong when you produce the final product? Do the math, or English, or social studies, or reading teachers allow their students to give the same incorrect answers in their subjects? Even if they did, those subject areas don’t have to have a presentation in front of their parents with everyone answering in unison with the correct answer. When one student can’t get the correct math answer, that student isn’t affecting the other students. It doesn’t work that way in a musical ensemble. So why is it okay to allow a student to sit there singing incorrect pitches while the rest of the students are matching pitch? Does the band director allow a student to keep using the wrong fingering and thus keeps playing the wrong notes? Music is an exciting art! You are either on pitch or you aren’t! That is what defines music and what makes it recognizable to those who are listening. It is also very unfair in a choral situation to the students who are matching pitch. I don’t know how many times I have had students in my choir come up to me and asked to be moved or to move someone because they couldn’t sing next to them because they were never on pitch. I know from personal experience how difficult it is to sing next to someone who can’t match pitches, and I have sung for many years with many years of voice training. If I find it difficult, what would we expect from a child who doesn’t have nearly the experience and training I have had?

Yes, I gave students one semester to learn to match pitch in my fifth grade choir. And, no, I didn’t put the students who had some difficulties doing that in back of the choir. I found out who they were and put them up front so I could help them better and so they could hear the pitches from the students who were matching behind them. If they couldn’t do it by

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the end of the semester, they were taken out of the choir. If they wanted more help to learn, I was available for them after school. But I have found over the forty some years of working with children, that if they couldn’t match pitch by fifth grade, the likelihood that I would be able to change that was very unlikely. By that age, children who don’t hear the different pitches inside their head are not likely to produce them inside their head.

The idea that everyone can sing is just plain wrong, just as it is wrong to think every child can run the 100 meters in ten seconds. Yes, the majority of children can run, but not necessarily fast. The majority of children can produce sound out of their mouths, but that doesn’t constitute singing. Some children and adults just don’t have the capacity to sing. Singing is an art and a talent. Not everyone possesses it, which is abundantly clear if anyone has ever watched American Idol. I am tired of these feel good music teachers. So we don’t get every child to sing. Big Deal! It isn’t the end of the world if a child can’t sing. What state mandates a state test that determines if a child can sing one correctly? I last taught in a 5-8 middle school. There were 800 students in the student body and over 400 of them sang in my choirs. Should I feel bad that I only had 50% of the student body singing? Was I a bad teacher because I required students to match pitch before they were allowed in choir?

Now understand I’m not talking about children going through a voice change. I understand the changing voice very well and children who are going through a voice change can still hear and match pitch. One just has to re-write some of the music to fit their changing voices. I am talking about the child who just doesn’t hear pitch, and doesn’t match pitches no matter how you present it to them. I’m sorry, but I think music teachers need to be honest with children, too. Maybe Ms. Gesler wishes to waste the majority of her time and the time of other students in choir trying to get a few students in music to the majority of my students who matched pitch and were singing the correct notes and making music as it was intended by the composer of the music. I heard Robert Shaw once comment in a rehearsal that the music of singing was a demanding master and that it was our duty as teachers and conductors to make sure we presented and taught the music correctly. We aren’t doing that if we allow students to just keep on singing wrong pitches because we are afraid of hurting their feelings.

The time to teach pitch in school is when they are in first and second grade. If it isn’t taught at that age, then it becomes very difficult to teach it as they get older, and I am tired of getting the blame for a child not being able to match pitch when it is the responsibility of the elementary music teacher to teach it. But I also understand that elementary music teachers don’t often get the time needed to do that job. A good example is my last school district. The elementary music teacher had nearly 1000 children in grades K-4. There was no way she had the time to do a proper job of teaching children about any phase of music, especially the time one needs to teach children about pitch. Then, as fifth graders, they walk into my choir room and the first lesson I teach is pitch matching and listening to each other. Some children just couldn’t do it. Probably about ten percent of the 150 children who came out for 5th grade choir dropped because they had trouble matching pitches. I don’t feel badly because I didn’t keep every child in choir. I kept the majority of them and I met their choral needs very well. We need to accept the fact that not everyone is able to sing, and the best thing we can do as choral teachers is to be honest with those students and tell it as it is! Maybe if we had a few more honest music teachers around, we wouldn’t have to endure those so-called singers on American Idol.

Donald L. Annis
Eau Claire, Wisconsin
Dear Editor:

I must respond to the letter from Donald Annis in the December 2005 issue of the Choral Journal. I have graduate degrees in vocal pedagogy and a thirty-five-year career as a singer, conductor, studio voice teacher, and educator.

Much of what Mr. Annis says is admirable. I certainly agree that we need standards in all areas of education. I have no problem with auditioning choral groups and setting high standards for participation, if the primary focus of the organization is excellence in performance.

I have a huge problem, however, with statements Mr. Annis makes in the latter part of his letter. My career and experience, Mr. Annis, tell me that indeed nearly everyone can sing. I talk to adults everyday, perfectly capable choral singers, who have been denied the pleasure of singing in a choral group their entire lives, because some teacher convinced them, in their childhood, that they couldn’t sing. That is a crime!

Mr. Annis is right that pitch differentiation is best learned early, but I can personally attest to the fact that it can be taught and learned much later. I can also cite scores of examples where potentially fine voices were discouraged simply because a teacher did not have time or, as is more often the case, did not know how to deal with them. When you audition singers, colleagues, tell them they have to do, tell them they need help matching pitches, tell them to come back next year, but never tell them they can’t sing.

Stan McDaniel
Greenville, North Carolina
Dear Editor,

I was disappointed in your decision to print Donald Annis's letter to the editor in the December 2005 issue of the Choral Journal. Mr. Annis's statement, "Some children and adults just don't have the capacity to sing," may be true for the miniscule percentage of the population diagnosed with amnesia, but Annis's letter implies that many of the students who opt out of choir or are unable to pass the choir audition in his school are incapable of producing a quality sound. He later comments, "I am tired of these feel good music teachers," in reference to teachers who accept a less-than-quality sound in favor of an all-inclusive choral experience. His statements reveal an unprofessional attitude that has no place in an academic journal.

What is our job, as choral directors, if not to teach accurate and artistic singing in both an academically challenging and emotionally rewarding environment? Shouldn't singing well, through hard work and skill mastery, "feel good"? Mr. Annis needs to develop his teaching skills through professional development rather than blaming his students' inability to match pitch on inadequate elementary training and innate ability.

Choral directors can learn to teach almost all students to sing on pitch. Warm-ups that focus on breathing technique, vocal experimentation, tone production, and vocal imitation using head voice can help a student, regardless of age or background, develop an accurate singing voice. Some students will catch on faster than others, but very few will never be able to match pitch.

I start my all my middle school general and choral music classes with a discussion about classroom safety and risk taking. Once my students understand the importance of making the classroom a safe place for all students to try new things, we talk about vocal development and voice

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change. We move to diaphragmatic breathing exercises. Then we start making silly sounds: puppy whines, baby coos, cat meows, train whistles, etc.

Finally, we imitate the sound of a cuckoo bird: the first activity in which I expect my students to match pitch. I expect each student to sing "cuckoo" (cuckoo) on the same pitches that I sing, even the changed-voice boys in their upper register. Each student matches twice, regardless of whether he or she matched pitch accurately the first time. If a student is inaccurate the first time, I tell the student, "This is what you did." I match the sound that the student gave me. Then I say, "Do the exact same thing and notice what it feels like in your voice."

Under no circumstances do I force a student to sing solo. I tell all my students they can use their speaking voices or their "close-match" singing voices until they feel ready to sing by themselves.

I tried this technique in my first year teaching K-8 general music classes in a public school with a population of 525 students. By the end of the year, I was able to count the number of non-matching singers on one hand. Furthermore, every student in the school became a comfortable soloist, if only for two notes a week. I have since adapted the above technique to meet the needs of a high school general music class and a multigenerational choir. I credit Susan Cleveland, Kodaly instructor with the Continuing Education Division of the New England Conservatory, for the "cuckoo" idea. It dramatically changed my approach with struggling singers.

Most people, regardless of age, can

It is up to the directors to find and adapt techniques to meet the needs of their students. I encourage Mr. Annis to seek professional development so he can better meet the needs of a broader range of students: the students who want to sing and already match pitch, and the students who want to sing and can learn to match pitch.

Sincerely,

Gretchen F. Pienetta
Chelmsford, Massachusetts

Dear Editor,

I am much obliged to Johannes Somary for his considereable correction. Indeed, he is quite right to assert that a large quantity of orchestral music was written for oratorios before Liszt's Christus. Because of clumsy writing, I failed to establish my main tenet: that until Christus no independent orchestral movements were incorporated into oratorios.

Mr. Somary points out correctly that Handel, Haydn, and Berlioz wrote pure orchestral music in their oratorios, for instance, overtures: "Chao" in Haydn's Creation, and incidental music, such as that found in the Elizabethan theatre: the "Flight to Egypt" from Berlioz's L'Enfance du Christ, the marches of Handel's Judas Maccabees, Samson, and Saul, or the prison scene in Theodora. One might expect to hear a pastoral, such as the "Pifa" from Messiah, during a scene change in a Baroque opera; indeed, hearing it during an otherwise traditional orchestral interpr-

On the other hand, both the "Shepherd's Song at the Manger" and the "March of the Three Holy Kings" from Christus are self-contained, stand-alone tone poems. The two movements were frequently excerpted in nineteenth-century concerts, some of which were conducted by Liszt. Moreover, an anonymous nineteenth-century arrangement of the "March of the Three Holy Kings" for large band can be found in C. F. Kahnt's collection of the Sächsischen Staatsarchiv in Leipzig. Regrettably, in my article I failed to adequately contrast the various types of orchestral writing (as defined by formal scale and musical function) found in earlier oratorios. I appreciate Mr. Somary's gracious letter as well as the opportunity to clarify my misstatement.

David Friddle
Miami, Florida

Dear Editor,

I want to clarify my intent as I wrote the first elementary music column. I had understood this new voice was to be inclusive of all elementary choral music as you suggested in your opening column of the February issue. Certainly "With Our Light" included children's choirs of all kinds, as was stated in the article. This particular article was to serve as an introductory column, pointing out significant moments in the Children's Choir movement over the past twenty years or so.

Future columns will be specifically focused on elementary school choirs. There are elementary choirs in many places that need this column. It is my intent to include them all.

Ann Small
Deland, Florida
Dear Editor:

David Fridtle's perceptive essay on Liszt's *Christus* reawakened in me a desire to perform this great masterpiece. I must, however, graciously point out a factual error in the article. Fridtle writes, "Until *Christus*, no oratorio contained movements for orchestra alone."

In Handel, such movements abound. If we examine *Theodora* (the prison scene), *Jeptha* (the arrival of the "deus ex machina"), *Judaeus Macabeus* (the famous march), or *Samson* and *Saul* with the even more celebrated "Dean March" used in both oratorios—not to mention the "Pifa" in *Messiah* or the opening movement of the "Flight To Egypt," which appears in Berlioz's *L'Enfance du Christ* (mentioned in Fridtle's essay), we shall soon see that some of the most beautiful music in oratorios has been composed for orchestra alone. And almost always this music contributes greatly to the drama. For me and for many others, I am sure, no greater example of movements for orchestra alone in an oratorio can be found than "Chaos" in Hayden's *Creation*.

Johannes Somary  
Riverdale, New York

Program <www.kerygma.com>, it is available as a "resource book" and with a companion's "learner guide." The resource book includes a useful chapter by Robert Page, "Messiah: The Music," which would be of interest to those who sing or hear the work but are not especially informed.

The Reverend Dr. Bechtel has done a similar theological study of the text of the Brahms's *Requiem*, also available from Kerygma.

Sincerely,

John Ferguson  
Northfield, Minnesota

Dear Editor:

I was disturbed to read the letter to the editor by Donald L. Annis in the December 2003 issue of the *Choral Journal*. Having dedicated my professional career to advocating the philosophy that singing is not a gift to the few, but a gift to all, I bristled at Annis's statement that "We need to accept the fact that not everyone is able to sing, and the best thing we can do as choral teachers is to be honest with those students and tell it as it is!"

Annis believes that by fifth grade "[Children who don't hear the different pitches outside their head are not likely to produce them inside their head]." Research in this area contradicts this statement. By the intermediate years, there is no difference in the test of aural acuity between accurate and inaccurate singers. Inaccurate singers can hear, but they lack the ability to coordinate the motor skills necessary for accurate singing. Especially important is the ability to generate sufficient breath pressure, which is the physical foundation for pitch accuracy. Also, the ability to make the rhythmically "feel" be various

tonal focus.

The research on vocal accuracy in the intermediate grades is clear—students can discriminate psychologically, but some cannot coordinate the motor process of this psychomotor skill. Because boys mature more slowly than girls, their physiological coordination often lags. Research findings show there are more boys than girls who are inaccurate singers by the fifth grade.

What Annis advocates is the traditional "select" approach to choral singing that is common in American schools. I have never been against select choirs, as long as all children are given the opportunity to sing in a choral setting. That is what Sandi Gesler advocates in her article, "Non-Auditioned Choirs in the Middle School," and which Annis criticizes so vehemently. The middle school years are the last opportunity to help children find their singing voices. After that, nonsingers typically remain nonsingers; forever!

Hopefully, the belief that "some people just aren't meant to sing" is fading. Vocal music teachers are graduating now from colleges and universities with a knowledge of techniques that will help all children to find their singing voices. Once these children become adults and take their places on school boards and state legislatures, the support for school music may become what it should be, but as long as music is considered to be a gift for some and not for all, this will not happen. Music educators have been their own worst enemies and Annis's statements are reflective of an elitism that cannot be tolerated.

Kenneth H. Phillips  
Winham, Massachusetts

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Editor's note: The mistakes that occurred in the December issue were not of his doing. The *Choral Journal* staff apologizes.