Shaping Expressive Performance: A Problem-Solving Approach
By Paul Broomhead

Years ago, I developed and taught a four-month series of lessons designed to help eighth-grade singers gain skills related to phrase shaping. Using poetic accent (i.e., speech inflection) as a frame of reference, the students made decisions regarding musical emphasis, de-emphasis, and phrase climax. A typical activity consisted of my giving them a phrase from a well-known folk song, allowing them thirty seconds or so to decide how to shape the phrase, and then having the entire ensemble sing the phrase with no direction, coaching, or conducting from me.

As I stepped aside and allowed them to determine how to shape phrases on their own, I found that although there were perceptible differences from student to student, there was usually an apparent collective interpretation regarding which syllables to emphasize, which to de-emphasize, and how much—and such interpretations were surprisingly appropriate. I began to wonder how my students were able to do such a thing. What skills did these eighth graders possess that could immediately bring about such a high level of agreement?

They were using speech inflection as a basis for their phrase shaping, which involves a complex interweaving of volume, intensity, tempo, pitch, and even color. But despite its complexity, most people

Constructivism can provide the key to helping choral students become independent, expressive singers.

Students can become more expressive singers when their teachers encourage them to make their own musical decisions.

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learn to use speech inflection to communicate at a very young age. These eighth graders apparently possessed a common understanding of speech inflection that enabled them not only to make musical phrase-shaping decisions, but also to agree, yield to each other, or both. In any event, they developed an appropriate collective interpretation despite the absence of a director. While I was amazed at the uniformity of their phrase shaping, I noticed that it did not happen naturally during regular rehearsal—only during the phrase-shaping lessons.

Four years later, I taught a high school chamber ensemble composed mostly of senior students whom I had taught continually since the eighth grade. What a wonderful experience it was to conduct students who had received the expressive training I offered to eighth graders and who had been sensitized to my conducting gestures for years. This was the most expressively responsive group I had ever conducted. I thought that if ever a group of ensemble students was ready to strike out on its own musically, this was the group.

I assigned the students to select and prepare a song with no help from me and perform it at their graduation ceremony. The performance was disheartening. After all those years of great training, the students sang with no noticeable phrase shaping. What could have gone wrong? They had been carefully watching an expressive conductor and skilled interpreter of music for a long time. They had also heard countless verbal explanations regarding musical expression. They had even demonstrated an ability to shape phrases! But somehow their training had not been enough to establish independent expressiveness.

What Went Wrong?

As I reflected on the eighth-grade expressive curriculum, my teaching approaches, and our ensemble's expressive singing, I began to see a problem in my instructional approach. With the brief exception of a formal curriculum when the students were eighth graders, my primary strategy for teaching expression was to be very expressive myself and have students follow my directions. These directions were delivered primarily through conducting and verbal instructions. I had explained many expressive concepts to the students, and they had participated in numerous expressive performances. While these experiences were valuable, I began to feel that my students had become too dependent on me. They had become excellent followers, but not artists. I may have unwittingly nurtured expressive dependence more than expressive independence.

Expressive performance is an area where passive learning is not enough.

The eighth-grade lessons taught me that students had the ability to shape phrases. What then did they need in order to increase their independence as expressive musicians? Specifically, how could students develop the habit of making phrase-shaping decisions and singing according to those decisions? In an effort to answer this question, I began to focus on theoretical explanations of how students learn.

A Theoretic Basis: Constructivism

Constructivism, a theory of learning that has received much attention from education theorists in the last several years, helped explain the dilemma I encountered. It also offered a practical means of addressing the problem. While there are many different emphases within constructivism, one theme seems to prevail: students do not simply absorb conceptual knowledge; they actively construct it by combining and reorganizing preexisting bodies of knowledge.

This theory challenges the behaviorist notion that conceptual learning takes place automatically as instructors break concepts down into smaller components and lead students through the right sequence of activities. To a strict behaviorist, good teaching is a matter of providing the right stimuli in the right order. Although such stimulus-response learning is very effective for teaching many skills and behaviors, from a constructivist perspective, it is far too passive on the part of the learner to result in deeper levels of understanding. Conceptual understandings must be actively constructed by students themselves, not by teachers for students.

To a constructivist, a conceptual understanding is a mental structure (a schema) that has been built in one's mind. We learn by combining new structural (conceptual) material with what we already have. This may mean building new mental structures (schemata) or reconfiguring existing ones in order to accommodate new material. We must construct concepts ourselves; it cannot be done for us.

One of the benefits of this perspective for teachers is that we do not have to oversimplify material in order to teach it. Real-life instances of concepts are of sufficient variety that we may present concepts in their full complexity and allow students to make sense of them, which they are quite capable of doing if given the opportunity. The more complex the concept, the more appropriate a constructivist approach may be in teaching it.

This makes constructivism a great fit for teaching musical expression—an area involving complex skills and understanding. Think of the interwoven variations in volume, intensity, timing, tone color, and more, that make up expressive performing. To make matters even more complicated, each of these concepts has multiple subconcepts (e.g., crescendo, release, accelerando, brighten). Certainly expressive performance is an area where passive learning is not enough.

Directors trying to teach performance expression using constructivist principles need to first determine what constitutes the best environment for students to construct their understanding of expressive performance. My own previous efforts lacked two essential elements of a constructivist...
learning environment: problem-solving opportunity and problem-solving responsibility.

**Problem-Solving Opportunity.** Since learners must actively construct their understanding of how to perform expressively, simply following another's specific directions (conducting gestures or verbal instructions) is not enough. In order for students to construct understandings of how to shape phrases, they will need plentiful phrase-shaping "problems" to solve. Students need opportunities to make expressive decisions!

However, this notion presents challenges in the ensemble setting. Since almost all ensembles are expected to perform their very best at some point, directors are naturally drawn toward the most efficient way of preparing students for performance. Even though we sense the need to engage students in learning and ask questions to get them to think, we also sense that the most efficient way to prepare an expressive performance is to get students to follow us meticulously as we interpret the music. We end up doing the vast majority of expressive problem solving, therefore, from a constructivist perspective, we do the vast majority of the expressive learning.

Soars when they engage not only in accommodating new conceptual material but also in seeking out the material. The most productive environment for learning expressive performance is one where students both identify and solve problems of expression. Progress toward becoming autonomous, expressive performers is most likely to occur when learners have both the opportunity and the responsibility to solve problems.

This can be difficult in an ensemble setting where the conductor assumes total responsibility for both identifying and addressing expressive problems. Although highly interested students may seek and solve expressive problems without invitation, most students probably will only do what they are asked to do.

**Our Challenge.** In the ensemble setting, students must learn to follow conductors' directions—whether in the form of conducting, verbal instruction, or modeling. I do not challenge these time-tested, firmly established measures for achieving expression in music. However, expressive results alone do not mean that individual students are learning to be expressive. A study that I performed showed that ensemble expressiveness was not significantly related to the expressiveness of individual ensemble members in the study; that is, ensembles that were "more expressive" than others failed to produce more expressive individuals.

The relationship between ensemble achievement and individual achievement has also been studied in relation to sight-singing, again with no significant link. Why? While our revered approaches are effective at producing excellent group performance, they alone do not appear to produce individual independence. In the remainder of this article, I offer three practical suggestions for increasing problem-solving opportunity and responsibility in the choral rehearsal.

**Three Practical Solutions**

**Small-Group Work.** One way to increase student problem-solving opportunity and responsibility is small-group work. Clearly, the smaller the number in an ensemble, the greater the level of individual responsibility for all aspects of performance, including expression. In addition, multiple ensembles need multiple ensemble leaders, creating the opportunity to pass leadership responsibilities around to many students. With attentive coaching from an expressive instructor, small-group work is an excellent way to give individuals more opportunities to participate in expressive decisions and help them feel more responsible for doing so.

It takes time to personally develop expressive knowledge and skills.

In order to add a significant amount of small-group work to a typical choral program, teachers may need to reconsider performing traditions. For example, in my area most district and regional festivals occur in early spring, leaving most of May and June for preparation of a final concert. With much of the weight of festivals and contests behind them, some teachers take a lighter approach to these final concerts. Why not divide students into small ensembles and have them select and prepare numbers to be performed for the class or at the concert? Teachers could reduce the number of large-ensemble pieces and alternate rehearsal days between full ensemble and small ensembles. Two or three days could be set aside for the ensembles to perform for the class, with the best ensembles earning the honor of performing at the concert. With a little creativity, teachers can find ways to fit small-group work into the curriculum, particularly if they believe that individual learning is accelerated during this time.

Even for those who incorporate small-group work into their programs, rehearsal with the full ensemble is still
where the majority of class time will likely be spent over the course of a school year. Therefore, directors need strategies for increasing expressive problem-solving opportunity and responsibility during the full-ensemble rehearsal.

Formal Phrase-Shaping Practice. One of the most apparent manifestations of expressiveness is the shaping of phrases, both on a small scale (e.g., within a given measure or on a given word) and on a larger scale (e.g., motion toward and away from a phrase climax). One easy way to increase expressive problem solving in students is to provide formal phrase-shaping practice at the beginning of each rehearsal as part of warming up. This would involve placing a well-known hymn or folk song melody on an overhead so that all can see. Students have a few seconds to make phrasing decisions guided by speech inflection or whatever idea is being taught at the time. Students give their individual interpretations a trial as the group performs the passage without a conductor. The conductor then gives feedback. It is important to insist that students make the music interesting and artistic. If this is done on a regular basis, students should quickly learn to sing with excellent phrase shaping—at least during this activity.

These suggestions are an improvement over my eighth-grade lessons in that they are used on an ongoing basis. But even this is probably not enough. Students can continue to form these constructions into daily habits by doing the same exercise with musical passages from the performance literature. This entails stopping in the middle of a rehearsal piece, giving students a few seconds to plan and execute an expressive interpretation of an assigned passage, and then having them demonstrate their interpretation without a conductor. Even one such exercise per day may be enough to help students develop a habit of mentally engaging in expressive problem solving.

The two formal problem-solving exercises outlined above work well together. The first exercise, using outside literature, provides ever-new, “unsolved” expressive cases for the students. The second exercise, using performance literature, ensures that students apply the out-of-context practice at the beginning of rehearsal to their actions during performance. In addition to nurturing artistic tendencies in the students, this should have a positive impact on the concert. These problem-solving opportunities closely resemble what teachers hope students will do habitually over a lifetime—that is, approach each new piece of music expressively.

Students need more than a brief curriculum unit if they are to develop expressive independence.

Informal Phrase-Shaping Practice. As students get accustomed to taking responsibility for artistic phrasing during the formal instruction, they are prone to take more responsibility for expression throughout rehearsal. The balance of expressive responsibility now has the potential to shift significantly toward students. This shift is a decisive opportunity for conductors to move toward an improved expressive education for students. They can maximize student learning by allowing students to solve expressive problems during the rehearsal. For example, before presenting a solution, conductors can allow students to have a shot at it first. Conductors can also become more sensitive to the times during rehearsal when students are less personally involved in the expression and at any such moment can simply drop their hands—a signal to the students that they are to take over.

This shift in responsibility can cause great concern for conductors who worry about ultimate performance quality. Experienced conductors know that no matter how independent students become, most students probably will not attain the same expertise in musical interpretation as the teacher. The recommended instructional activities will also take precious rehearsal time. Teachers know that the most efficient way to facilitate musically excellent performance is to rely on their artistic knowledge and skills and attain strict compliance from students. Finally, some conductors believe that striving for musical excellence is of central importance in students’ musical education, regardless of the level of independence that students achieve.

It takes time to personally develop expressive knowledge and skills. The suggestions I offer here would initially compromise rehearsal efficiency. But this does not mean that ultimate performance excellence has to be compromised. These suggestions do not promote adopting lower performing standards; they only encourage teachers to take to give students expressive problem-solving opportunities. At first this may mean performing slightly less often or performing fewer pieces at concerts. But as student independence gradually increases, rehearsal efficiency will improve as the conductor learns to use the students’ enhanced skills to realize the desired interpretation.

This can be tricky! Conductors must still be in command—when their hands are up. Conductors still attend to entrances, cutoffs, and rhythmic alignment; their role in rehearsal and performance is still to preside, command, and even overrule. But as singers begin to produce more of the basic expressive shaping, conductors become free to attend to deeper matters of expressive refinement. Conductors who don’t have to denote every crescendo or every de-emphasized syllable can pay closer attention to subtle developments in mood, larger-scale shaping, or any of the other inexhaustible details in an artistic performance.

Conclusion

Many music teachers across the nation are creating tremendous performances and bringing about great personal growth in students. Such teachers can increase their students’ expressive independence because they have established strong musical authority, and they will be able to prepare their students for performance
even while incorporating activities for greater individual learning.

My earlier work with eighth graders revealed a surprising level of expressive consensus among students and a surprising ability to quickly achieve expressive unity. My later experience with older students revealed that students need more than a brief curriculum unit if they are to develop expressive independence. Constructivism reveals that if students are to develop accurate understandings of concepts, they need regular and ongoing problem-solving opportunities and responsibility. These realizations have led me to propose that conductors incorporate into their programs significant amounts of small-group work, formal expressive problem-solving opportunities, and frequent spontaneous problem-solving opportunities.

I believe that teachers can increase student engagement in expressive performance learning without giving up performance quality. With some initial sacrifice and with persistence, patience, and time, we can continue to guide our students on a wonderful journey toward performance excellence while providing an environment rich in opportunities for our students to become expressively independent.

Notes
3. Ibid., 15.
June 20-24
Publisher's Middle School Band/Jr. High Symposium with Five Clinicians
Introduction to Playing the Drum Set - Marc Dicciani
Basic Skills in Music Technology: Instructional Software, Communications and Digital Media - Floyd Richmond
The Steel Band in the School and Community - Marc Svaline, Jimmy Leyden
Percussion for the Elementary/Middle School Director - George Hattendorf

June 27 - July 1
The Art of Instrumental Music for the Creative Director - Ed Lisk
Basic Skills in Music Tech: Electronic Instr., MIDI Sequencing and Notation - Ken Peters
Handbells for Church and School (Beginning & Advanced) - Phyllis Hentz
Aspiring to Excel - Initiatives in Leadership for Music Educators - Ken Raessler

Sequential Classroom Music Curriculum - K - 5 - Lois Fiftal

July 5 - 9
Printing Music by Computer using FINALE - Scott Watson ** (Parkland HS)
Instrumental Conducting - Jerry Nowak
Junior/Senior High School Show Production - Jay Fry & Staff

July 11 - 15
Printing Music by Computer using FINALE - Tom Rudolph
The Art of Expressive Playing - Jerry Nowak
Band Instrument Repair Level I - Chuck Hagler
Rhythmic Development Through Drumming and Dance - Anthony DeQuatro
Arranging for the Small Band - Quincy Hilliard
Guitar for the Non-Guitarist - Michael Miles
Music Theatre in the Elementary School - K - 6 - Lois Fiftal
Creating Accompaniments Using Technology - Scott Watson (Parkland HS)
Web Authoring - Steven Estrella

Basic Skills in Music Tech: Electronic Instr., MIDI Sequencing and Notation - Hank Wajda *(AR HS)

July 18 - 22
Guitar Skills and Curriculum Development - Michael Miles
Band Instrument Repair Level I - Chuck Hagler
Arranging Rehearsal Techniques - Quincy Hilliard, Brian Balmages
Printing Music by Computer using Sibelius - Steven Estrella
Choral Conducting - Larry Edwards
Jazz Improvisation: How to Play It and Teach It - Jimmy Amadie

July 25 - 29
Basic Skills in Music Technology: Instructional Software, Communications and Digital Media - Hank Wajda * (AR HS)

July 26 - 29
Integrating Technology into the Music Curriculum - Lee Whitmore
Eastern String Educators Workshop - Dorothy Straub, Kathleen Goodrich, et al

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* Course held at Archbishop Ryan High School, Philadelphia, PA
** Course held at Parkland High School, Allentown, PA

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