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The purpose of the study was to describe and interpret a particular culture of boys with changing voices at the American Boychoir School by means of an ethnography. Themes that emerged were (1) the boys' own perceptions of the voice change process, (2) healthy strategies for singing through the change, and (3) psychological issues. Informants were 27 students, 2 music directors, and 10 staff members. Data-collection techniques included interviews, observation, participant observation, and the examination of material culture. Analysis involved preparation of field notes and interview transcripts, document analysis, and study of the field notes and interviews. Evidence from the data, while supporting documented patterns of the male voice-change process, pointed to the uniqueness of each boy's experience. Boys were musical by skilled, vocally knowledgeable, and benefitted from group vocal instruction in addition to choral rehearsals. Boys were taught how to use all available notes in their ranges safely. Instilling confidence and the "light approach" were two strategies used to assist boys negotiating the voice change.

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“It’s a Metamorphosis”: Guiding the Voice Change at the American Boychoir School

Choral music educators have been keenly interested in the male voice-change process for some years now, and ample space has been accorded this topic in the literature. Researchers have suggested stages in the voice-change process (Cooksey, 1992; Cooper, 1953; McKenzie, 1956; Swanson, 1973, 1977), and authors have variously discussed appropriate strategies for the care and training of the adolescent male voice (Adler, 1999) and suggested guidelines for choosing appropriate repertoire (Cooksey & Cox, 1998; Cooksey & Welch, 1998; Kennedy, 2002). Choral textbooks include chapters on the adolescent voice—both male and female—and include repertoire lists suitable for the adolescent male voice (Brinson, 1996; Collins, 1999;

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Phillips, 2004). More recently, attention has been paid to the psychological effects of the voice change and its effect on the number of adolescent males in middle and high school choirs (Adler, 1999; Kennedy, 2002; Koza, 1994).

Surprisingly sparse, however, are accounts of the male voice-change process from the point of view of the participants themselves. Killian (1997) examined "perceptions of voice change among changing-voice boys by simply asking their opinions" (p. 523). She interviewed adolescent and adult male singers and nonsingers in an attempt to better understand the physiological and psychological aspects of singing through the voice change. Noting the wide variety of individual responses, Killian concluded that the "voice-change process is extremely idiosyncratic" and recommended "additional study to further examine [the] physiological, acoustical, and psychological factors that affect the human voice" (p. 543).

Adler (1999) surveyed high school choral teachers to determine "what teaching practices contribute to the building of attitudes and values affecting the enrollment of male singers in secondary choral programs" (p. 29). When asked what was their greatest concern about teaching boys with changing voices, respondents mentioned "the social/psychological dimension ... specifically relating to student interest, reluctance to sing, and peer pressure [and] the physiological/psychological dimension with concerns relating to students' vocal difficulties, and the resulting anxiety and confidence problems" (p. 31).

Building on the research of Killian (1997) and Adler (1999), the present study is an exploration of the male voice-change process in a context eminently suitable for such an investigation—the American Boychoir School (ABS). About 20 years ago, the school adapted its long-held treble-voice program and focus to accommodate the new reality of boys' voices changing prior to Grade 8. Studies by Killian (1999), Moore (1995), and Rutkowski (1984) point to earlier vocal maturation for boys, as early as Grade 5 and 6.

As is typical of qualitative inquiry (Janesick, 1994), the research process began in a rather unfocused manner with a global interest in the handling of the voice change at ABS. Midway into the study, however, themes began to emerge, and it is these themes that provide the focus for the investigation. Thus, the purpose of the study is to describe and interpret a particular culture of boys with changing voices at the American Boychoir School by means of an ethnography. Themes that emerged from the data are (1) the boys' own perceptions of the voice-change process, (2) healthy strategies for singing through the change, and (3) psychological issues.

METHOD

Context

The American Boychoir School was selected for the study for the following reasons: (a) it was accessible, (b) its population of boys in Grades 5–8 provided informants with a variety of voice ranges,

(c) the fact that the school consciously embraced the changing voice and included SATB repertoire sets it apart from other residential boy-choir schools in the area,¹ and (d) few researchers to date have examined the voice-change process from the perspective of boys situated in such a privileged environment. In addition, the facts that the American Boychoir School attracts educators with a particular interest in nurturing boys through this transitional phase and dedicates large amounts of time to cultivating the adolescent male voice made it a more advantageous setting in which to study this phenomenon than many public middle schools where time for choir can be short and boys are often few and far between. Founded in 1937 as the Columbus Boychoir in Columbus, Ohio, by local businessman Ralph Riley and choirmaster Herbert Huffman, the choir school was relocated to Princeton, New Jersey, in 1950. Affectionately dubbed the "17-acre bubble" by a student, the school is housed on the gracious Lambert Estate. With the advent of a new dormitory in the early 1990s, there is now a boarding capacity for approximately 80 boys. The school covers the academic curriculum² in addition to providing intensive vocal, choral, theoretical, and performance training for boys. There are both men and women on the faculty,³ houseparents, and staff, although the role of proctor⁴ seems to be reserved for men. There are two choirs: the Resident Training Choir (known as the "RC" to the students) for boys in Grade 5 and entering boys in Grades 6 and 7, and the Concert Choir ("CC"), often divided into two, for boys in Grades 6–8. Touring has always been a hallmark of ABS, with the Concert Choir(s) routinely undertaking three major North American tours each year and several shorter "run-outs" (short trips to nearby cities or local gigs). The Resident Choir normally tours for a week to 10 days during May of each year. Recordings have also been an important part of the choral program at ABS, especially during the past decade. A recent brochure lists more than 20 titles.

Design, Data, Analysis

An ethnographic design (Creswell, 1998) suited the purpose of the study, as the cultural context was an integral component of my forming an understanding of the voice change process at the American Boychoir School. Accordingly, I spent a considerable amount of time at the school over the course of 6 months⁵ "hanging out" (Bogden & Biklen, 1998) as I observed the general atmosphere of the institution. I attended rehearsals and concerts and observed small-group vocal lessons, aural and written theory classes, and a sampling of academic classes. I conducted semistructured (Fontana & Frey, 1994) interviews with the music directors and several of the academic and support staff⁶ and held small group interviews with the boys. I joined the choir on various "run-outs," including a wedding, a recording session, and a day of school assembly programs. I also "shadowed"⁷ the choir on its 6-day December tour. I attended major school functions, including the 2003 graduation ceremony, the 15th

Annual National Choral Conference, a parents' auxiliary meeting and subsequent parent visiting day, one of four formal dinners held each year for boys, faculty, and staff, and end of semester festivities in December. Informal conversations were conducted with staff, students, and parents, and these, as well as my observations, were documented in descriptive field notes (Bodgen & Biklen, 1998).

Despite the fact that the president of the ABS board had granted me permission to conduct the study, my access to the school was controlled and monitored by the gatekeepers of this culture. Thus there were limitations that were imposed on my interactions with the students, faculty, and staff. Both parental and administrative permission needed to be secured for the interviews with the boys, and a senior school staff member was required to be present in the interview room apart from the researcher. Boys needed to be interviewed in small groups. Interviews had to be scheduled during the boys' free time. Interview questions were submitted to both the president and the head of school for approval.⁸ First-year boys were excluded from the study, as they were deemed by the head of school to have an inadequate amount of experience to share. Adult informants needed to sign a letter of permission prior to their interviews. Finally, in a spirit of reciprocity typical of ethnographic research (Creswell, 1998), the researcher submitted the final draft of the report to key school personnel for verification.⁹

As the primary data collector, I was conscious of the effect that my values, assumptions, and biases would have on the study. The fact that I was a woman researcher investigating a predominantly male context had bearing on not only how I was received, but also on the data that I collected. Furthermore, it is likely that my gender influenced interview responses, particularly those of the boys, and also my interpretation, since I am an outsider to the male culture.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Material culture (Hodder, 1994) included musical scores, concert programs, school promotional materials, CDs, school handbooks, and academic tour packets. Analysis consisted of reading and rereading the complete manuscript containing field notes and interviews, examining print materials, and listening to CDs. Data reduction (Bogden & Biklen, 1998) was achieved by combing through the data for references to the voice change, compiling this material into a shorter manuscript, and finally sorting through this shorter manuscript until the three focus areas emerged. Triangulation (Denzin, 1978) was effected through the cross-referencing of interview transcripts,¹⁰ observations, and material culture. In addition, representative informants read drafts of the report as a further measure of validity.

INTERPRETATION

In Their Own Words: Boys' Perceptions of the Voice-Change Process

Of the 60 boys enrolled in the school at the beginning of the 2003–2004 academic year, 36 granted permission¹¹ to be interviewed.

Of these, 6 were first-year students and so were excluded from the study. Of the 30 remaining students, 27¹² were interviewed in small groups ranging from 3–7 students and were asked a range of questions concerning their life at ABS (see Figure 1). Among the group were 3 sixth graders, 9 seventh graders, and 15 eighth graders. Some of these had not entered the voice change process at the time of the interviews,¹³ including 5 eighth graders. In addition to interviewing the boys, I spoke with an alumnus currently on staff at the school as a proctor. General comments from the boys' interviews followed by two in-depth profiles, one of a chorister and the other of the alumnus, serve to paint a rich portrait of the voice-change experience at ABS. The selection of informants for the profiles was based on the following factors: (1) their stories provided rich though contrasting experiences; (2) the involvement of alumni in the life of ABS, as staff members as well as parents and fund-raisers, is an integral component of the ABS experience; (3) the alumnus, in his role as proctor, provided critical support to the chorister during the time of his voice change.

Boys' Views on the Voice-Change Process

Boys talked of their voice change as happening rather dramatically or more gradually. Don,¹⁴ a self-possessed eighth grader, experienced a rather rapid change. He elaborated:

I guess I'll say that my voice change is probably the easiest of everyone here except for Bill's [*Laughs*. Bill's voice hadn't changed yet.] Mine happened during the space of 2 months during the summer. So, I was a Treble 1B when I left and I was a Bass when I came back.

Soft-spoken Tom, also in Grade 8, told a different story:

When I came [in sixth grade], I went to RC as a treble 1A and then I went into CC and I was a treble 1B. During the school year, my [voice change] started, but not too much, and I wasn't singing as strong as I was before. Like, my voice was getting weaker. ... I couldn't sing with all my strength. I was losing notes and it started to come down. Right now, I'm Alto 1.

Second, boys mentioned the phenomenon of "losing notes" in the middle of their voices, thus creating gaps in which they couldn't sing. Boys were well aware of this fact and were able to not only pinpoint where these gaps were but also verbalize how they handled them. Tim, an energetic eighth grader, related his story:

Like I have a big gap, and the gap usually changes every time I sing ... I never know what I can do until I sing it ... Like it would be maybe middle C to G or D through G and usually my part goes up to that. You see I can sing really high (not that well), but I can do it sometimes. During the warm-up, I have to find out where I can sing and so I know what I can do for that rehearsal ...

Third, boys mentioned the ability to sing in (and recognize) different registers—head, chest, and falsetto—as being crucial compo-

Questions for Boys' Interviews

1. Tell me how you came to be a student at ABS.
2. How long have you been here? Where do you think you will go to high school?
3. Tell me all you can about what you learn in music classes and rehearsals.
4. What part do you sing in the choir now? Earlier? Voice change? Dealing with that?
5. I'd like to know about the repertoire you are learning. What types of pieces? What are your favorites?
6. How do you balance your schoolwork with your musical training and performing?
7. What is your favorite subject(s) besides music? Why?
8. Imagine you are describing ABS to someone who doesn't know anything about it and has never heard of it. What would you say to help that person understand what goes on here?
9. What do you like most about ABS?
10. Favorite memories?

Figure 1. Survey questions for this study asked of boy choristers at the American Boychoir School (ABS), Princeton, New Jersey.

nents of their experience at ABS. Adam offered this thoughtful response:

Well, I think the most important thing this school has taught me is the technique that I've learned for using my lower voice, 'cause my voice was changing for a lot of last year. So not a lot of time at this school has been spent singing up high. It [ABS] taught me a lot about using head voice, chest voice, and falsetto ...

Finally, boys remarked on their growing understanding of the breathing mechanism (in theory and in practice) as their voices began to mature and their chest ranges became more prominent. Ed, a seventh grader, expressed his view quite pointedly:

When I first came here, they were talking about how to breathe before a note. I had no clue what they were talking about and I thought it would be just the

same. But as my voice changed, I began to feel the difference because if I didn't take [in the breath] right when I sing the notes, my throat would get really tight and hurt ...

Tim agreed, stating that he knew what Ed was talking about. He continued: "Now it's easier to breathe in a way, like you have to do it. If you don't, you really can't sing well."

The voice-change stories of these boys confirm patterns described in earlier research. Boys either experienced a dramatic change, often developing gaps in the voice (Swanson, 1973), or a change that was more gradual, allowing them to slip down from treble to alto to tenor (Cooksey, 1992; Cooksey & Welch, 1998; McKenzie, 1956). Being able to make informed choices about how to negotiate their different registers and often unpredictable ranges is consistent with the advice of Cooksey and Welch (1998), who have stated that "adolescents should be taught to develop an awareness of their own vocal abilities; they must be guided by enlightened teachers who understand the process of vocal maturation and know how to deal with it on a practical level" (p. 109). Clearly these young men are the recipients of sound vocal teaching. The fact that the necessity of breathing fully became a reality for these boys as their voices matured is of special interest to teachers of choral music. Phillips (2004) writes: "Unless students have a good understanding of the breathing process and are able to demonstrate the breathing motion, breath control, and breath support exercises, it is unlikely they will correctly apply the breath to the voice for optimum vocal results" (p. 234). Though research has demonstrated that young singers can be taught to breathe correctly (Henry, 1995; Phillips, 1983), the stories of these boys suggest that the mastery of breathing techniques takes considerable time and is more likely to "hit home" as singers' voices begin to mature.

Michael's Story

Michael came to ABS in Grade 6. He was placed in the Treble 2 section of the training choir and ended up being lead Treble 2 by the end of the year. In his seventh-grade year, Michael moved up to the concert choir. He told me:

I really liked Treble 2. I didn't want to be an alto or a tenor and I didn't want to be Treble 1. In the CC, I was hoping that I would become a 2A (Treble 2), and I did become a 2A and everything was going good.

Michael went on most of the tours that year, had several solos, and then came the Boston tour in May. His voice began to change. As he said:

I remember that we were rehearsing with all the men for the Boston tour, and Mr. Metallo¹⁵ told me to sing the last two measures of my solo, and I started to sing it, and it didn't come out of my throat. It was just some random day. Mr. Metallo thought that maybe my voice was just hurting that day, [but] we rehearsed it for a couple more days and it was still the same thing. It really made me frustrated when he said he had to give my solos away.

Michael came back for his eighth-grade year and his voice was still in the change. He began the year “as an Alto 1. [He] really [couldn’t] sing the tenor that well and the treble was obviously too high, so [he] was kinda stuck in the middle and [felt] that this year [was] going to be very frustrating.” During the fall semester, I observed Michael closely in rehearsals, in vocal and theory classes, and in the hallways. I also talked to Michael’s teachers and had the occasional informal conversation with Michael himself.

Michael’s voice continued to develop under the careful guidance of his vocal and choral teachers. He received instruction on releasing the Adam’s apple. Metallo cautioned: “When you’re reaching for it [the note], there’s tension.” He advised Michael to “breathe lower—get the air lower. Use these muscles,” he said, putting his fist on Michael’s stomach. Michael has a habit of singing out of the side of his mouth when he is tense and Metallo corrected this in vocal sessions and monitored it in rehearsal. Metallo confided to me: “Michael could go on the fall tour because he’s such a good musician. There’s a glorious instrument in there, a tenor voice, but I don’t want to push him. He’ll definitely go on the December tour.”

Not being selected for the fall tour was “frustrating” for Michael. He found the transition between being a top soloist in his seventh grade to being “right in-between” hard. Faculty and staff were there to support him through this time, but his feelings were clearly evident in his countenance and demeanor. However, the director’s decision proved to be a wise one. The lack of performance pressure that would have been required on the 3-week tour gave Michael time to adjust to his new voice. His emerging tenor notes became more settled and secure, his vocal tone began to round out, and Michael himself became more relaxed, as is evidenced by his rehearsal behavior. During one of the combined training choir and at home choir¹⁶ practices, I noticed a new levity in Michael’s face as he experimented with both his tenor notes and his upper range, cracking and laughing as the falsetto either worked or didn’t. Training choir director Lynnel Jenkins told me:

Michael doesn’t like to show that he is happy. He was like that from the time he came into the school. But he is so happy that he has this voice, and he knows he sounds wonderful. It’s just like there’s Michael—and the rest of the choir. All the boys want to aspire to be like him and I told him, “If any of the voices change in RC, I’m holding you responsible, because you’re making it so attractive.” And he said, “I’m just trying to get some recruits!”

Michael was selected for the December tour and placed in a lead tenor role for that trip. In rehearsal, he puts his whole body into the music, preferring to stand when he sings, swaying in time to the music. Always focused with his eyes on the director, Michael makes a valuable contribution to the choir. Joking in rehearsal with a fellow tenor about the low B-flat they both can’t yet sing, Michael seems to be negotiating the voice change in a healthy way. Freedom has, for the most part, replaced frustration. In similar fashion to several of his

fellow choristers, Michael's experience typifies the gradual voice-change process (Cooksey, 1992; Cooksey & Welch, 1998; McKenzie, 1956).

Chris's Story

Like Michael, Chris came to the American Boychoir in Grade 6 and, also like Michael, was placed in the Treble 2 section of the training choir because, as he told me, "I hadn't paid close attention to the teachers as far as using my head voice. I wasn't using my head voice ever. I didn't even know I had one." However, by the beginning of Grade 7, Chris was singing first treble in the concert choir. But not for long! Towards the end of that year, Chris's voice dropped to a tenor. He explains:

The middle of my voice went away. Mr. Litton¹⁷ moved me down to the tenor part or first alto. That was basically all I could do that year. Either I would sing tenor or I'd have to sing anything that was really high because the middle was gone.

During the summer, Chris's voice seemed to level out and so when he came back to begin Grade 8, Chris had the middle, the top, and also

this lower extension so that I could sing baritone. So that year, I sang baritone and second alto, but I also sang first treble solos. I also did bass solos. It was hilarious at our Christmas concert because I did a baritone solo on "Go, Tell It on the Mountain," and then I walked around the risers all the way to the other side to sing a treble solo immediately following.

Chris also explored extended ranges of his voice that year imitating both upper and lower registers of pop singers, in particular, Mariah Carey. As he related:

Well, I listened to her so much that I memorized every song on the CD, and I opened my mouth one day and one of those notes came out well above high C. It wasn't head voice because I brought it down one day and it switched again at high C, and I kept going down, and I had another switch that went down to my lower register. ... I could sing an octave above high C, and I could sing a low F or maybe a low E in the eighth grade. ... By the end of the year, I had five octaves.

Chris is convinced that the reason he had, and still does have, an extended range is due to the fact that he continued to sing through the voice change and was permitted to use both his top and his emerging baritone voice during that eighth grade year. In his words: "I think it was keeping everything alive because if you don't use it, you lose it. Mr. Litton made my voice change a very good experience. I didn't feel bad about losing my treble voice at all."

Chris is now 26 and has returned to the American Boychoir following university graduation to be one of the school proctors. He

now sings baritone, but still retains an extensive upper range that, as he terms it, is “not really a falsetto, but more like a boyish head voice.” Chris is readying himself for advanced vocal training and is striving toward a solo career.

In company with Don and other current ABS students, Chris’s voice change resembles that of a significant number of boys who, while negotiating their voice changes, develop “areas of silence” in the voice (Swanson, 1973), usually in the middle register, while at the same time retaining the ability to sing in both the emerging lower and upper registers. Phillips (2004) explains that proponents of this view of the voice-change process believe that “boys’ voices may change slowly or quickly and may not be limited to a midvoice comfort range of an octave or less during puberty” (p. 115). Through the guidance of his conductor, Chris continued to sing through this awkward stage, tackling either the tenor part in SATB music or the treble part using his upper register. The next year, he was fortunate to not only have a more settled voice but also be in a position where he could experiment with his different ranges. It seems that singing in both his baritone and treble registers caused him no harm; on the contrary, this freedom to explore the extremes of his voice allowed the young singer to develop both an extended range—almost five octaves—and increased vocal flexibility.

A Cooperative Venture: Healthy Strategies for Singing through the Change

While personal voice-change stories are useful and can assist in building a clearer picture of the process of male vocal maturation, they need to be supported by a system of strategies for training the changing voice in order to be applicable to the choral community at large.

Consistent with the recommendations of those who write about training the changing voice (Cooksey, 1992; Phillips, 2004), choral directors at ABS use a variety of descending exercises to both explore the falsetto range and connect it to the emerging chest voice. Metallo’s “beginning of the semester plan” exemplifies this approach. As he said:

With the changed voices, I’ll really work the new area. It’s interesting for me to note what they can do with the falsetto. Some of them have nothing. Some of them might have a little squeak, some of them might have a little bit of head voice, but it’s quite limited. So, I work the change—I try to expand the changed area—and then I incorporate the falsetto into the change. And I do a lot of descending exercises.

For changing-voice boys, revisiting and sometimes relearning vocal techniques that were successful with the unchanged voice is an important factor of a healthy transition. An eighth grader commented: “You lose everything you know about singing. When we try to sing low, we sing high and vice versa.” This tendency was noted by one of Killian’s (1997) respondents also. Training choir director

Jenkins commented on her strategy for handling the change:

You want to be sure that every time they're practicing, they're practicing accuracies and not inaccuracies. And you always have to be listening to what they're doing vocally so that they don't develop any bad habits. All the wonderful vocal training that they've done before is still the foundation, but it's just this new instrument and things are different.

Releasing tension so that the voice can be free is another important goal of vocal teaching at ABS for both unchanged and changed voices. Many times in vocal class, Metallo would pay attention to this phenomenon, shaking the back of the neck to release neck tension in a treble singer or directing changing voices to speak descending "ya-ya-ya" or "gluck-gluck-gluck" exercises to relax the voice and tongue. Metallo explained the necessity of this relaxation:

Because the speaking voice is a mess, the first thing [a boy does] to kind of manipulate it so that it doesn't happen is to grip on to the tongue, and so I spend most of my time with the changed voices releasing the tongue muscle because they squeeze. They think they're going to make a powerful sound by squeezing the throat to make it come out, because it's so different now.

In company with the recommendations of Haasemann and Jordan (1991), Metallo used numerous vocal sighs interpolated between sung and spoken exercises in his vocal sessions with the boys to further assist them in relaxing the vocal apparatus.

A significant feature of all voice training at ABS is the effort to build boys' vocal understanding, an understanding that fosters personal ownership of the voice as boys (and their voices) mature. Boys learn about the history of male choral singing and are guarded against vocal abuse through classes on the care of the voice. In vocal sessions, Metallo asks boys to verbalize the sensations of a certain note or range, to identify the range they are singing in, or to explain the purpose of a vocal exercise. "It is really key for any age-group to be able to verbalize it," he told me, "and even if I choose not to use the voice book's vocabulary, I may choose one or two words that I think they can handle." With the advent of the changing voice, boys are well aware of what notes they can sing, and are thus able to take ownership for their voices in rehearsal. Metallo explained:

I might say in rehearsal, hmm, the third part here, I need more sound because of where it lies, and the hands go up—"Sir, I'll do that; I can do that." And I know they can do it and they know they can do it because I've met with them ... [So, I say,] "Okay, map out your score." They are taking on the responsibility; they know that they can handle it.

Cooksey (1992), Hook (1998), and Cooksey and Welch (1998) would support the vocal training philosophy at ABS, believing as they do that adolescent boys should be made aware of their own vocal abilities and taught how to manage their voices. Cox (in Hook, 1998, p. 21) states:

There is so much more known about the voice now and how to take care of it. I try to pass that along to my students, both boys and girls. They can, they have to, be responsible for their own voices. ... I think knowledge is more important at this age than any other age.

“Sweet and Sour”: Psychological Issues of the Voice Change

Returning to the stories of Michael and Chris, it is easily apparent that the phenomenon of the changing voice can be a traumatic event for some boys (Killian, 1997). Michael was “crushed” when Metallo had to give his solos away (at the end of his seventh-grade year) and “frustrated” when he was not picked for the fall tour (in Grade 8). Yet, a couple of months later, he was transformed—a new person and a new voice, unconsciously engendering the admiration of many training choir boys who wanted to “sing just like him.” Chris, on the other hand, had an easier time. He told me that “it is actually a privilege as you get older here to be a baritone. It [is] a big thing. You [have] a lower voice. You are a man now.”

The boys-only environment of ABS is a definite factor in the handling of the voice change. The president told me on my first day that he had answered an inquiring passerby at an airport¹⁸ with the descriptive phrase “ABS is ‘Title 9’ for boys to sing!” In like vein, the academic head talked about how she saw ABS. “It’s a place where we nurture the emerging male.” She is committed to assisting boys’ emotional development and remarked to me how much they grow during the eighth-grade year. “They begin it as boys and end it as men,” she told me.

Associate music director Fernando Malvar-Ruiz added another slant to the boys-only environment:

Let’s not forget that these boys, most of them, would be ostracized in their own environments, in their own schools. They would be pointed out, made fun of, beaten up by other children and they come here where everyone else is like they are. ... Boys with the same abilities, same interests, and that is what makes them thrive and again that gives them freedom to be themselves.

Confirming Malvar-Ruiz’s statement is that of an unchanged-voice eighth grader who talked poignantly about being teased in his former mixed-gender middle school choir for having a treble voice. By contrast, he termed ABS a “sanctuary” that had given him a “sense of security.”

The facts that boys took noticeable pleasure in their interactions with the Princeton Girl Choir during the National Choral Conference and looked forward to school dances notwithstanding, boys seem to value the single-sex environment during this pivotal point in their lives. Timing and speed of the change seem to be critical factors that affect either positively or negatively a boy’s experience of his voice change.

Comments from the boys’ interviews support this view. One boy confided: “It’s actually better here to have either an unchanged or

changed voice.” Certainly, those who experience the height of the change in the midst of a year will have more adjustments to make with respect to range, repertoire, solos, and even touring than those whose change occurs more rapidly over the summer.¹⁹ This is a fact of nature and cannot be avoided. However, the stories of Michael and Chris provide examples of how the voice change can be handled in a manner that offers both understanding and support to the adolescent male. Sharon, the school secretary, who interacts with the boys daily, illuminated the psychological dimension in this interview excerpt:

Because [the voice change] is a serious issue in terms of how it would affect them emotionally and because of the music that's the heart of this place, I think the adults must deal with it, as the handbook says, very sensitively. I've never seen a boy be really devastated or upset by it. Not that they might not have thoughts or feelings, but they are directed in a healthy way, in a way that helps them realize that there are pluses and minuses coming at the same time. So they may be losing this, but they're gaining other things and this change is preparing them for the next phase of their life. I think they get that.

Information from adult interviews confirmed that, indeed, special attention is paid to this component of the changing voice process. In fact, it was Chris who offered a listening ear to Michael when Michael was dealing with his feelings of disappointment over not being selected for the fall tour. In my observations of group voice lessons, full and sectional rehearsals, Grade 8 tutorials, and student/staff and student/student interactions, I noticed that boys received counseling and support for negotiating the voice change from both men and women as well as their peers. This support ranged from addressing matters of adolescent development directly in an eighth-grade tutorial conducted by the academic head (a woman) and the dean of students (a man), to an informal conversation about voice-care between a woman houseparent and a chorister, to a serious discussion between the music director and a chorister prior to a December tour concert about whether the chorister should “sit out” due to vocal issues, to a humorous exchange between two choristers during which they tested each other's current voice range at the piano.

Killian (1997), reporting on the results of her study on the voice-change process of male adult versus adolescent musicians and non-musicians, writes that “given the number of negative experiences mentioned that actively involve choir directors, it seems advisable to disseminate information to future choral educators about the musical expectations and sensitivity necessary to instruct changing-voice boys more effectively” (p. 534). It seems that the boys at ABS are receiving effective instruction and support for negotiating this critical transition in their lives.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

We can learn much from the boy choristers who live in the “17-acre bubble.” First, while patterns of the male voice change do cer-

tainly exist, each young man's experience is unique (Killian, 1997) and demands deft handling by the choral director. Frequent monitoring of the individual voice, small-group vocal sessions, and an ear and eye that are well attuned to noticing both aural and physical symptoms of vocal stress are essential components of a choral teacher's practice.

Second, exploring and using all available notes in a young man's range seem to have no detrimental effect on the voice provided that, once again, there is careful monitoring by the teacher. Allowing for this experimentation may even produce adult singers with wider ranges. This is particularly noteworthy as choral teachers of this age-group, especially those who are dealing exclusively with mixed-gender ensembles, may be tempted to have all boys—regardless of whether they have unchanged, changing, or changed voices—sing the tenor and bass parts. Socially this might seem to increase boys' comfort level and encourage male participation, but vocally, it is misguided.

Third, analysis of data from this particular culture tends to suggest that working with boys in a single-sex environment may be beneficial during the time of the voice change. Whether this finding is a function solely of the site chosen for this particular study and the particular interview questions posed, or whether it might be indicative of wider applicability as some nondata-based choral research materials suggest (e.g. Brinson, 1996; Roe, 1983), is a matter that warrants further research using other research designs. That being said, however, public school teachers working with young adolescent singers would do well to consider the example of ABS and schedule their middle school choruses in single-sex groups or, failing that, to provide opportunities for boys to sing together (Demorest, 2000).

Fourth, providing singers with the knowledge of both good vocal technique in general and the capabilities of their individual voices in particular is crucial if one is to safeguard students from harming their voices at this pivotal point in their lives (Cooksey & Welch, 1998). To be sure, young singers will need to be reminded not to oversing or push the new, powerful, and enticing chest voice. However, directors who empower choristers to take responsibility for their own voices will be richly rewarded as they see their singers blossom and mature.

Finally, helping a young man navigate through the frustration that can occur when the voice is in the throes of change appears critical to his emergence out the other side. Associate music director Malvar-Ruiz's philosophical approach to handling the voice change at ABS provides an appropriate summation:

I try two approaches at the same time. The first is to instill confidence in [the boys]. It's okay; there is nothing terribly wrong with you right now. Your voices are not working the way they used to work, but you can be confident that you still have a voice and a mission in this choir. The other is the light approach. You know, it's not all that important; we can laugh about it. Your voice cracks, that's fine. ... So there are those two things: first—confidence. You can sing well even

with a changed voice. You can produce a beautiful sound and contribute to this choir very much, and the second one is, when it cracks, why don't you laugh about it and go on?

NOTES

1. St. Thomas Choir School in New York City continues to work with treble voices, as does St. Alban's School in Washington, D.C.
2. Since 1984, ABS has been accredited by the Middle States Association of Schools and Colleges and is also a member of the New Jersey Association of Independent Schools and the Association of Boarding Schools.
3. The music director and associate music director are men, whereas the resident training choir director is a woman.
4. Proctors assist the music directors, supervising the students in rehearsal and on tour and acting in the capacity of "houseparent on wheels," according to Chris, the proctor I interviewed.
5. Visits were conducted during the months of May, June, and September–December 2003.
6. Interviewees were chosen on the basis of their interaction with the boys in different areas of campus life. Thus, I interviewed the school secretary, the head of academics, the dean of students, a houseparent, a proctor, two academic staff members (one who had been involved with the school for more than 20 years and another who had been at the school for only 3), two parents, and Jim Litton, music director of the school from 1985–2000.
7. By shadowing, I mean that I followed the choir on their tour, traveling behind the bus in a car.
8. To gain approval from both the Institutional Review Board at Rutgers University and the ABS administration, questions needed to be framed in a positive way (see Figure 1).
9. Although I had intended to submit the draft to key ABS personnel (e.g., president, head of school, music director(s), proctor, secretary) for verification prior to publication, this procedure was also deemed a necessary step in securing approval by the head of the school for this study.
10. Interviews included those with a boy who had left the school after two years, his parent, and also a parent whose son was still at the school but who had reservations about aspects of the program. This information added a divergent component to the data.
11. Information letters and permission forms were mailed to all parents in late August, and 36 were returned to the school.
12. I had intended to interview all 30, but tours and other time constraints prevented this.
13. Boys' interviews were scheduled in September 2003.
14. Pseudonyms are used for all the boys in this study.
15. Vincent Metallo is the current music director of ABS.
16. While one section of the concert choir is out on tour, the remaining members form the "at home" choir.
17. Jim Litton was music director of ABS from 1985–2000.
18. This passerby had noticed the tour choir (in uniform) and questioned the president as to how one got boys to sing these days.

