

Assessment of Ensemble

Vocal Technique

- **Posture/Breathing:** The students demonstrate poor posture when standing and when sitting during rehearsal. Many of the students stand slouched and with their weight shifted onto only one foot and not equally distributed. They stand with their heads looking down into the music, which makes them have poor breath support as well as posture. I observed them sitting in the floor with their legs crossed, and this led to extremely poor breathing technique and posture. Overall, their posture/breathing could use the most work to help them sing better.
- **Phonation:** I wasn't able to observe their changes in head and chest voice since I only heard the altos and the ranges they sang in did not change between head and chest voice.
- **Resonance:** The ensemble demonstrates decent resonance, but they could use more instruction on keeping their vowels tall and having more space when singing.
- **Diction:** Listening to their repertoire, I thought the students had fairly good diction. When singing, they were somewhat relaxed and not thinking about their diction much, but they impressed me with how well their diction was. I think they could use more instruction on how to develop their diction further, but they did well.
- **Expression:** The ensemble could have had more expression in their singing overall. I feel that with the repertoire they were singing, with the right instruction, could have been very successful with their expression.

I think the students could use the most work on their posture and breathing. Developing the area of respiration would benefit them in all the areas of vocal and choral technique. The first thing they need to recognize are the muscles used when breathing. Having them lie on the floor and placing a textbook on their abdomens and having them grow fat with air would do just this. Also, being instructed on which muscles are used when singing will help them be able to use them properly. Performing the exercise slow sip, the students will be able to know how inhale slowly and fully engaging their muscles, then exhale on a "shh" sound for a number of beats. This exercise shows them how to take a breath and stay energized when singing so they can perform their pieces with a better sound and also develop their endurance. Resonance is the next area that needs to be developed. Doing exercises such as singing the vowel [u] as in the word blue, and sustaining it, then singing it in three registers will help them know how to produce vowels in three registers and sustain the pitches in these vowels.

Music Literacy

For rhythm reading, I didn't observe them using any systems, but was told they weren't working on any systems due to the short amount of class time. They learned takadimi in grade school, but hadn't been using it in these grades because of the shortened class periods. I wasn't able to hear them and assess their ability levels on takadimi, as well as know what systems they used at all.

For pitch reading, they know solfege particularly moveable do minor. They are familiar with hand signs and understand them. They are mainly familiar with triad patterns, sometimes moving to la and re.

Literature Preparation

When I observed the students for the first time, they were preparing for their concert that was to take place in two weeks. I was only able to observe the altos singing before the concert, as well as hearing them sing only two of their pieces. They were preparing the pieces Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho, Cantate Domino, and one other Ho Down style piece. I was able to hear only the alto part of Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho, and the range sounded very suitable for them. It was in a range that fit them appropriately, and wasn't too hard or easy. Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho sounded very well rehearsed and ready for the performance, but could have used more technical help with vowels, phrasing, and expression. I didn't notice any concepts being taught from the literature, only rehearsing the songs for the final performance. There are many concepts that should have been taught in this literature, especially with taller vowels and resonant tone production, phrasing especially dealing with breath support, and more expressive elements. There are many exercises the students could have been instructed on to develop these concepts, and link them to the piece. Exercises focusing on vowel formation and space for resonant tone production are appropriate for solidifying the unity of those vowels sung, for example, the ending "o" in Jericho.

A more in-depth assessment of the ensemble is currently when they are getting ready for their Christmas concert. The only literature I know of that they are doing is A Merry Modal Christmas and Torches. A Merry Modal Christmas has a voicing of two parts, both with ranges B3-D4. The students have been working on this piece for a while now, and they are progressing through the piece well, with only little instruction. It seems to be of an appropriate difficulty level for these middle school girls, with part-singing, and singing in French. The main part that needs work within the ensemble is the confidence within the parts. The second part is not very strong when singing, unlike the first part. Focusing on each part individually would benefit the students for their concert and strengthen their abilities to sing. There have not been many concepts taught through this piece of literature so far. She tried to teach them what the key signatures were, and when they changed keys, and tried to teach them how to figure out what the key is, but they don't even know the notes names on a staff yet, so it is difficult for them figure it out. Expanding on the key signatures would be good, but also concepts based on French and English folk songs would be great areas of focus for these students. The song torches is written for SATB, but I am not sure yet if they are singing it with the boys or not. Much of the song is sung in unison even though it is written for soprano and alto. This piece has portions of it that are very difficult for a middle school ensemble. There is a great deal of chromaticism in this piece, especially in the alto part, where they have to sing whole steps and half steps, and they cannot hear them let alone sing them. This is problematic and will require more rehearsal time and concentration. The ranges of this piece are sopranos: D4-E5, altos: Bb3-E5, tenors: D3-E4, basses: A3-E4. There has not been any focus on teaching concepts through

this piece. There are many opportunities to teach concepts in these pieces, and there isn't much instruction. Concepts that could be taught through this piece would be dotted values of notes such as dotted quarters, and dotted eighths tied to sixteenth notes. There are many of these, and to teach them and how they relate to straight eighth notes would be beneficial to the understanding of how they should be sung. Instruction on note values in general would improve the rhythmic accuracy of the students.

Motivation and Management

The teacher didn't seem to have a clear classroom management policy and keep control of the classroom. The students love to sing and that is clearly obvious, but they are lacking motivation from the teacher. The students seemed to have a hard time staying on task and listening to the teacher. The challenges they face are mainly due to lack of instruction in areas. They do not listen, which is a result of classroom management issues. As far as rhythm and pitch reading, I am not sure how they are doing in this area and if it is a challenge or not. I feel that in order for these challenges to do better, I feel that a classroom management policy would benefit the students. The teacher would be able to refer to this policy and the students would know how to behave.