Where are the Boys?

During my first year as a middle school choir director, there was a constant question running through my head: Where were all of the boys? I would see them dominating on sports fields, mastering robotics club and slumped in my general music classroom, but why weren’t they in my choirs? Most perplexing would be when I heard a young boy singing innocently (of course while they were supposed to be working on another task), and I would say “Hey that’s a nice voice you’ve got there. Why aren’t you in choir?” The response would always be “No way! I’m not joining chorus” or “I can’t sing. Please don’t make me.”

Does this sound familiar to you? Can you think of an adolescent boy who sings, but refuses to join chorus, or a young elementary aged boy who already refuses to sing? How do we as teachers and parents foster singing in our boys, and encourage them to make it past the voice change and into adulthood singing? As a female singer, I couldn’t speak personally on this issue, so I went to a direct source: my 6th, 7th, and 8th grade male choir members. In my second year as a middle school choir director, I can proudly say my male participation has increased from only 20 male singers, to 40 male singers. This year we took the time to discuss why they sing, why their peers might not sing, and how to encourage their male peers to sing.

Deterrents for Male Singers

After discussing with my male singers, we came up with four main deterrents for boys to sing: teasing/bullying, apprehension about puberty, lack of exposure, and lack of encouragement to play artistically at a young age.

Teasing/Bullying—Before the voice change, young boys who show apprehension about singing are often concerned that their voices sound too “girly,” in comparison to the adult male voices around them. Despite how many professional male singer celebrities are present in the media, boys often face teasing, being called effeminate, and being compared to girls for doing activities such as singing and dancing. This teasing can come from male and female peers, siblings, adult role models and even parents.

Puberty—The voice change can begin for some boys as early as fourth grade, and the unpredictability of what sound will come out of their mouths, combined with the aforementioned teasing, can make singing seem akin to torture.

Lack of Exposure—if students aren’t taught from a young age about how to use their voice (that they have a high voice and a low voice, and both voices are normal), they are less likely to consider singing in a group or independently. When...
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male singers are exposed to male vocal models (including adult mature voices, the falsetto voice, head and chest voice, and unchanged male singing voices), singing becomes a less intimidating and more approachable concept.

Tips from This Issue

◆ Encourage boys to sing and experiment with their high voice, early in their childhood.
◆ For male role models, recall your own voice change and experience, and explain that cracks, and sudden change in range are to be expected during this time.
◆ Sing with your child at home.
◆ Sing together as a family, in the car, at karaoke, even in the kitchen!
◆ Show male singing vocal models.
◆ Find a private voice instructor at the start of voice change
◆ Encourage your boy to join choir!
◆ Teach boys to embrace their own sound, and let them know that they don’t have to sound like anyone else.

Lack of Encouragement to Play Artistically—If you look at the black top during recess at an elementary school, you’ll find young girls playing hand clapping games, singing, and making up dances. Meanwhile, you’ll see young boys typically playing a sport or building with their hands. Even at a young age, most boys are encouraged to explore their scientific, logical, and athletic abilities, but how many are offered a chance to develop their artistic abilities, more specifically singing abilities?

Where Do We Start?
As mentioned in Susan Bialek’s previous two articles, developing the singing voice begins at a very early age in life. Little boys should be encouraged to play pretend, to use their high voices. They absolutely should not be ridiculed for how they sound. During my time as an elementary teacher, my heart would always sink when a boy in Kindergarten told me he didn’t sing because his parent told him he “sounded like a girl,” when in actuality he sounded like a normal 6 year old boy.

Both boys and girls need to be taught with enthusiasm, and excitement about their developing voices, by their parents and teachers. When I asked my middle school male singers if anyone ever made them feel proud of their singing voice, the number one answer was “my parents.” They also had a family member who sang with them or to them at home. Along with encouragement, and enthusiasm, the importance of normalizing a child’s singing voice, before, during and after the voice change cannot be stressed enough. When I say normalize, I mean to accept their voice no matter what stage of development your child is in, and help them accept their voice too. If a young boy’s voice is unchanged, encourage them to sing with ease, and celebrate light pure sound that only a boy soprano/alto can have. If some of their peers’ voices begin to change before them, remind them, there isn’t an exact age when their voice must change. Some boys will not experience a change until high school, while some students see a change as early as 4th grade. Some boys will take several weeks or months to change into a fully changed male voice, while others may seem to change over night. There is no “normal”, and that is okay. Explain that girls also go through a voice change; it’s just not as drastic.

Remind them that, just as they are a bit clumsy during adolescence, because of their sudden growth spurts, their voices are a little bit clumsy too because their vocal folds have also experienced a growth spurt. The feeling of no control over their vocal instrument is only temporary, and singing through this change will make singing after the change much easier. Encourage them to keep singing, and most importantly resist the urge to chuckle after hearing one of those endearing voice cracks. For dads especially, try to remember how you felt when you first experienced that change, and share your own experience with your son.

Throughout boys’ musical development, they should be exposed to different types of singers. Along with listening to the radio, and hearing those vocal models, try to expose your child to live musicians. In the Baltimore area, we are lucky enough to have an abundance of live music performances. What better way for young singers, male and female, to see men singing in the different parts of their range?

Why Should They Sing
Most likely, if you are reading this article, you’ve come to your own conclusion about why people should sing, especially in a choir. There is research which supports the physical and mental health benefits of singing in a group, and how participating in music can help with math/reading scores, but there is more value to getting your boys singing than a statistic.

I want our boys and girls singing because it gives them a safe place during the school year, to express themselves without anger or violence. It gives them a sense of belonging and brotherhood and trust. But don’t take my word for it.

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Read what my 7th and 8th grade male singers had to say on the matter:
The Harper’s Choice Male Singers on Why Boys Should Sing in Choir

“You don’t have to worry about being singled out.”

“You have people who you can trust and have fun with.”

“Not worrying about stage fright. It doesn’t happen much anymore. It just makes me more confident.”

“It’s a lot of fun!”

“Because I have other people to count on if I make a mistake.”

“Helps you get used to your changing voice.”

“I believe that it is an amazing thing to sing so I would ask anyone to join chorus.”

“They could use the joy of singing to reduce/eliminate stress, because I always feel happy in chorus when we get to sing. Also, being praised for your singing ability and courage to sing a solo is very well worth it”

“Because unless you really don’t like singing there is no reason a boy shouldn’t join just as much as a girl should.”

On Encouraging Boys to Be Comfortable in Their Own Skin

“When I was in pre-school…we were supposed to do like a… performance for the parents, and I didn’t want to do it. My mom talked to the teacher. She came back. She said, “You don’t have to do it, but you have to do something,” and I said “I want to do a gymnastics routine with my dad…and a couple days later my dad showed up with me in matching rainbow tights, and we did this gymnastics routine in front of the parents at the preschool, and the important thing about that story to me is that One: My mom gave me permission to do something that everyone else wasn’t doing, and Two: My dad supported me and made it possible…and I think a lot of us are here because people in our lives did that.”—Daveed Diggs after accepting the 2016 Tony Award for Best Featured Actor in a Musical for his role as both Marquis de Lafayette and Thomas Jefferson in the 11 Tony winning musical “Hamilton: An American Musical.”

Male Vocal Ensembles to Watch

Local
The Maryland State Boychoir http://www.marylandstateboychoir.org/
UMBC “Mama’s Boys” All Male A Capella Group http://www.umbcmamabsoys.org/
John’s Hopkins University “All Nighters” Male A capella Group http://www.jhuallnighters.com/

National
The All American Boys Chorus http://www.taabc.org/
Chanticleer http://www.chanticleer.org/#about-chanticleer
King’s Singers http://www.kingssingers.com/

Parent Resources

We hope these family-friendly resources provide ideas that encourage your child’s musical abilities. All the articles in this series are written by the Children’s Chorus of Maryland’s music faculty and supported through a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. For more information about music programs at Children’s Chorus of Maryland, call us at 410-494-1480 or email ccm@ccmsings.org.

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Children’s Chorus of Maryland & School of Music
Nurturing Voices, Minds & Hearts for over 40 Years

Under the direction of Artistic Director Susan Bialek, our music Conservatory program features highly qualified teachers, small classes, and in-depth vocal enrichment to provide children with a complete musical education and choral experience. Children as young as 5 ½ are encouraged to audition for one of the Conservatory’s three choirs. Classes and rehearsals are offered twice weekly from September to May at CCM’s facility near Towson, and performances are held each semester. We welcome families whose children attend public, private and parochial schools as well as those who are homeschooled. Scholarships are available. In addition to our Conservatory, CCM offers a summer camp, and music and play classes for 4 to 6 year olds. For more information, visit www.ccmsings.org, call 410-494-1480 or email ccm@ccmsings.org.