

Vowels and Diphthongs

As the choral director, we are in charge of the vowel sounds that our choirs make. Therefore, we must listen hard and ask ourselves if we like what we hear. With a choir, I try to modify my vowels from the very beginning of the learning process, as I teach the notes.

A few things to consider:

- Vowel sounds vary around the country because of regional accents. Therefore, one conductor might be working harder on different vowel sounds to another.
- For a folk song from a certain region, you might adopt characteristic regional vowel sounds to give authenticity.
- The vowels carry the quality of the sound. The spinning of the air carries the vowel sound and their shape then colours the music. You can alter the vowels in a phrase and completely alter the colour of a passage of music.
- If you want a certain vowel colour at any one time, all choristers need to sing with the same mouth shape. You can ask for the shape you want and expect it. Show your singers, don't just tell them!
- Some vowel work can come as part of the initial warm/up vocal development session where you can practice various words and passages ahead of the song.
- The vowels vary in brightness (depending where they resonate): Noo, nor, nah, nigh, nay, nee. We can deliberately darken or brighten this list by asking our singers to place these vowels slightly differently in the resonators.
- Some of the darker vowels can flatten a note (and vice versa).
- A note around the vowel nee: for voices singing high, nee needs to be modified towards the nah shape (especially for sopranos and tenors)
- Popular music styles, even in Britain, use slightly American vowel sounds. How much do you want your choir to do this?
- Bugs bunny teeth help with lots of vowel sounds!!

Diphthongs: These are when more than one vowel sound is put together. The English language has thousands of examples of this, like the word 'though'!

- Generally we sing the first vowel sound and rapidly put in the rest of the vowel sound right at the end, before the consonant. Exceptions to this rule are words like 'music' and 'you'.
- Even good choirs need some help from time to time, e.g. with words like 'now'.
- Barbershop styles turn their diphthongs differently. More information can be found about this on the Barbershop Harmony Society website.
- If your choir is to sound stylish singing in a popular style, you might alter the way you sing diphthongs, but choristers need to turn them together as a team.
- Turning the diphthongs towards the 'ee' sounds can add twang.