

The Effectiveness of Rote and Note Teaching for a Performance in the University Choral Group

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ABSTRACT

Effective teaching methods have continued to gain attention of scholars in the academic world with music inclusive. Finding the best teaching methods for effective transfer of music knowledge to the students becomes a general issue among teachers of music. The process of selecting the most effective music pedagogy has become an area of focus among music scholars. Every music educator has the option of using either standard music notation or rote instruction for the basis for teaching or communicating a musical idea or composition to his or her students. While rote instruction involves teaching students who do not have music in front of them, note instruction involves teaching students who do have music in front of them. Each of this method has its strength and weaknesses in the teaching and learning of music. Consequently, determining which method is most effective in knowledge transfer to the student becomes the subject matter of this paper. The author seeks to know how both teaching techniques influenced the intonation, note accuracy and rhythm in the music sang by the students in the choral group. Thus, this paper compares the effectiveness of using either rote or note teaching techniques in teaching music in the university choral group.

Keywords: Music Pedagogy, Rote Instruction, Note Instruction, Music Performance.

INTRODUCTION

The traditional music notation of the choral group tends to be a fairly recent body of work. Studies related to choral singers are ongoing, but there is insufficient support for literature on the efficacy of rote instruction and standard music notation in teaching choral group performance. The ability to sing music on the spot and the skills acquired to read standard music notation is a necessary component of the student musicianship and is therefore an important goal of the education of choral music. Thus, students who participate in performing ensembles demonstrate their strengths in the areas of their instrument of choice and are able to sight-sing in a choral group because of the experience that they have gained in sight playing their musical instrument. As students progress in their musical instruments, the skills taught in the early stages of their training will become the building blocks for future achievement. Students, who regularly play musical

instruments and take part in choral group encounters, show skill levels in traditional music notation with regard to their precision in interpreting music notation. Music pedagogy researchers have continued to discuss ways of teaching music to ensure a successful transfer of expertise from the teacher to the learner. Though there is a lot of music education literature on the topic of rote teaching, most of it seems to be divided into various categories. Although some research concentrates on instrumental instruction, others analyze vocal instruction; this has made it difficult to give a clear opinion on rote instruction in general, as it depends largely on the form of music taught.

The majority of research supports rote instruction, but there is common belief among educators, particularly at secondary and higher levels, that rote instruction is dumb, non-academic, or

counter-productive to the student learning process [1]. Teachers and directors who do not support rote instruction may claim that, while rote instruction can be effective in teaching songs, it is ineffective in making students better prepared for potential musical challenges. I may argue that serious music needs students who can read music. Non-rotary supporters may continue to say that well-developed ears are helpful and sometimes required, but excellent reading skills are just as critical. On the contrary, supporters of rote may argue that rote instruction allows teachers to teach their ensembles music that they

Vocal Rote Instruction

Several researches on vocal rote instruction indicate that students learn better when teachers integrate rote instruction strategies into their lessons. This was confirmed by [2] who examined the visual reading skills of students who were taught rhythms and pitches using rote instruction. He noticed that these students relied less on their music directors and conducted more diverse repertoires, as they preferred to follow notes rather than text. However, Moore, [3] suggests that rote teaching hinders the student's learning process, as students have frequently rehearsed their own errors using this approach rather than strengthened with rehearsal. They concluded that rote instruction had an inherent problem, arguing that repeated errors without clear notation to correct the error might lead a student not to learn his or her part well. They added that, since the students studied the music in parts, they could not perform the music smoothly or fully because the student did not understand the music as a whole piece, but instead as several sections of the whole piece. Many international cultures favor rotary instruction over standard notation. It is also part of the practice of a lot of music in other cultures around the world that rote music is taught. The transmission of songs and concepts through oral tradition is a foreign concept to westerners, but is also done by other cultures. [4] work dealt with teaching students' rhythmic

would not be able to perform if the ensembles were to rely solely on note instruction. Supporters can use rote only as reinforcement for note instruction. All that has been said, educators and academics seem to vary in their views on the validity of rote teaching in the classroom [1]. Interestingly, the majority of work promoting rote instruction supports rote instruction for younger children. By contrasting rote and note instruction to one another, this study highlights the relative strengths and disadvantages of each form of instruction.

principles in ethnic music. The teaching of bar line rhythms is deceptive. The researcher favors rote teaching where students can copy rhythmic patterns. The researcher goes on to argue that students learn best when they hear or interpret music not as an event-to-event sequence, but rather as a time continuum. Trirnillos [5] studied teaching / learning structures in musical cultures around the world and found that rote instruction is an intercultural constant. One of Trimillo's points is that by studying how culture transmits musical ideas to other members of the same culture, we can come to know how that culture feels, and we can expect to benefit from their customs. Rote teaching is found in ancient Hawaiian songs, hula and classical Indian music. Because learning has a verbal rather than instrumental basis, the voice is considered to be an essential part of the learning process. It may be that standard notation is not a choice for these foreign musicians, or it may be that the rote technique is preferred. There did not seem to be any work comparing music teaching approaches in these cultures. The rote technique is the standard. Denny [6] studied music in the liturgy and ritual of Islamic societies and discovered that the oral component of rote learning is emphasized in the teaching of children, but that it is reinforced by written instruction. Denny noted that students of Islamic culture learn by rote, but also improve the written element of music

through standard notation learning. That method of learning involves rotary learning and is then supported by notation writing practice. It is not the same technique that students learn by rote by getting music in front of them. Townsend [7] studied music instruction and learning in the African-American Baptist Church. Discoveries found that a lot of the learning choir members did by oral transmission or rote. Members of the choir copied or sang the same thing that the director sang to them. The director

Instrumental Rote Instruction

Not as much literature has been written on instrumental rote instruction as on vocal rote instruction. Nevertheless, the majority of work in the instrumental area supports the concept that when teachers adopt rote teaching methods, students can gain and learn faster and better. Lee [8] researched the Suzuki principles of violin, finding that the approach relied too heavily on rote teaching and, in effect, that students had fewer imagination and reading skills. In addition, the repertoire was small and not well selected, although this cannot be due to the rote instruction.

Lorenz [9] analyzed the disparity in preparation for rote learning, improvisation and tonal conceptual creation in the early guitar class. The researcher acknowledges that the findings were not definitive, although it seemed that rote learning was just as successful as the other two teaching techniques. [10] contrasted the "rote-to-note" approach and the conventional music-reading approach to teaching early instrumental music. The rote-to-note method, which uses common rote songs and solfege singing, was taught to one group and not to the other. The findings did not produce significantly higher scores for either party to draw meaningful conclusions on the merits of any instructional technique.

Hahn [11] looked at the connections between reading music and reading language with implications for music

would sing the soprano part first, and then the sopranos would copy it. The director would sing all parts to all sections, one by one, and finally all sections would learn music. This teaching method, known as "lining out," typically happens during the rehearsal, but it can be integrated into the performance. Townsend suggests that this teaching approach would be sufficient in some schools, because the two go hand in hand, it had been integrated along with African-American religious music.

instruction (notation). Students have been split into two groups. One group learned about "vacuum" notation, while the other group learned about regular notation in the form of common rote musical patterns. No major conclusions have been drawn. The researcher suggested an alternative hypothesis that the rote instructional approach was more successful than the conventional system commonly used to teach reading and hearing music.

Creider [12] addresses music education using the Suzuki approach. In Creider's opinion, both listening and rote learning are tools that students can use to free themselves from negative and sometimes ineffective "music babble" that can confuse and deter students from reading music. Suzuki teaching can be an efficient form of music teaching if it is complemented by a range of musical activities, including concerts and performances, a broad repertoire and lessons that build on one another through sequential activities [12].

Instrumental rotary training can require vocal techniques. [13] studied the impact of singing instruction on early instrumental students. Her results concluded that the use of singing was an important method for improving musical expression for instrumental students. Students who sang their part before they played it learned the music more easily and performed with more voice

Strength and Weaknesses in Standard Music Notation and Rote Instruction

The ability for choral group to sight-sing using standard music notation during rehearsal tends to improve the students' knowledge of musicianship and training themselves in sight-singing skills. Choral director's value skilled sight-singing, it is apparent that the time devoted to it during rehearsals is very limited due to the limited short period of rehearsals and less implementation of sight-singing. Upholding the above view, [14] "emphasizes the encouragement of singers to think for themselves to be an important step in the process of learning to sight-sing (p.10)".

Several authors and researchers [15, 16, 17, and 18] report the overuse of the piano in rehearsals to be a hindrance in the development of sight-singing skill among singers. Choral directors who habitually use a piano in rehearsal (as opposed to challenging their singers to read notated music prior to hearing it) are essentially preventing their singers from decoding music notation. Instead, the director takes on the responsibility of doing all of the thinking for each of the non-readers in the ensemble [14].

Guelker-Cone [17] affirmed that "consistent rehearsing without accompaniment can improve a choir's sight-singing, intonation, sense of ensemble, and ability to respond to conducting gestures (p.17)". It is pertinent to affirmed that music directors or conductors must take on the responsibility to develop good intonation without the consistent aid of the piano to help the student in mastering the act of singing at sight. Consistent use of piano during rehearsals tends to weaken the student skills of sight-singing and thereby remitting the students' knowledge of musicianship.

Voth [18] asserted that "conductors who champion the merits of the unaccompanied choral rehearsal, as this scenario are thought to foster musical independence and develop an awareness of ensemble balance among the singers (p.31)".

Rote instruction is the ability to practice or learn a piece of music by repetition, based on the idea that one will be able to accurately recall the material the more it is repeated without holding the materials to be sung at hand. According to [20] described rote learning as "characteristic of informal apprenticeship system of music education and training procedures in Nigeria (p.179)". Hence, there is no significance different between rote instruction and tonal memory, owing to the fact that both have to do with learning a piece of music by continues memorization. Tonal memory is the ability for the students to sing a piece of music after hearing it repeatedly by following the tone patterns.

Most students tend to practice their song through rote instruction and tonal memory to enable them save time and help them avoid struggles of sight-singing standard music notation, this perhaps, weaken the student's knowledge of musicianship. [21] stated that in the United States today, rote teaching is considered an "ill-favored version of modeling and imitation that is used to teach melody and rhythm patterns in specific context, and is perceived to require little thought on the part of the students (p.26)".

Rote instruction and tonal memory present similar challenges to the choral group and both weaken the ability for the students to learn to sight-sing standard music notation. Teaching classical pieces by rote instruction pose a challenge and alter the actual intonation and melodic sequences in the songs. Brown [22] affirmed that in the choral group, "rote learning teaches students to rely upon a vocal or instrumental model to present new information, after which it is sung back with little to no understanding of music notation (p.33)".

The advantage of rote instruction and tonal memory is the ability to learn a piece of music within a short period. However, some error is likely to occur once rhythm is not accurately observed. Scott [15] clarified that "the perception of

time saved in employing rote teaching to be deceptive, and that a rote-only approach compromised rehearsal efficiency in the long run, as rote learning and tonal memory have become more commonplace in the choral group” (p.31). Most music directors do not wish to discourage non-readers from choir membership due to their zeal and efficiency toward choral group performance, hence, the music directors may choose to alter their rehearsal strategies to include a combination of rote learning, tonal memory, and sight-singing standard music notation in order to accommodate the multiple skill levels found within their choirs. It is pertinent to note that no single method is enough to teach choral group performance and thus related methods could be combined other than focusing in one method.

However, to effectively motivate the students and help them to achieve a good knowledge of musicianship in choral group performance, there is a need to accommodate both the students that have the ability to sight-sing standard music notation and students that are non-reader following these strategies:

- Choral directors should implement sight-singing standard music notation and minimize constant use of rote instruction to accommodate different skills among the students. A persistent use of music note instruction would eradicate rote instruction.
- Students should be allowed to think for themselves to enable

CONCLUSION

Majority of literature points to endorsing vocal rote training as a viable technique in the classroom. It is an interesting point, because note teaching has been the traditional method of music education for many years. Every music educators have the option to choose the methods that suit his/her teaching skill the most. Perhaps, considering the method that would be able to enhance students' knowledge of musicianship and help build the group performance is of paramount

them enhance their sight-sing skills, hence, music director should encourage each part (S.A.T.B) with a student coordinator to rehearse separately for few minutes before the four parts sing together.

- Choral directors should limit the use of constant piano during rehearsals to improve the student's knowledge of musicianship.
- The process of actually learning to read notation may be time-consuming, therefore, enough time should be devoted to choral group rehearsals and remit rushing the students to sing. Quick rehearsals tend to push choral group towards observing rote and tonal memory.
- Musical directors should select musical pieces according to the student's ability, experience and musical knowledge of the choir members in order to enhance the student's knowledge of musicianship.
- Musical materials should be ready before time and distributed to the students prior to rehearsals to enable them study the standard music notation and understand the task expected from them.
- Observing the above strategies will encourage non-readers to improve their knowledge of musicianship at ease.

important to the group. Relaying on one method could limit the group performance. However, if the method of choice is rote instruction rather than reading notation, choir members may become too reliant upon their director. Teaching singing in choral group could be effective when two methods are combined bearing in mind that the methods chosen should transfer the needed knowledge of musicianship to the students.

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