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Conductors as Sound Sculptors
Tools for an Inclusive Approach

The Challenge
We can achieve good choral blend, balance, and intonation with any vowel! However, some vowels make this process more simple or straightforward, so those vowels have become building blocks in the American tradition of choral music. That's an efficient use of time resources, but it narrows our field for expression. It can negatively impact intelligibility and it may limit our access to the cultural sounds of a broader choral canon.

Thesis
This session advocates for broader exploration and acceptance of vocal timbres within choirs, and for a method of instruction that moves away from the limitations of language-based descriptors to address vocal sounds on their own terms.

Tools for Value-Neutral Ways to Address Vowels

1) Terminology of sound production—adjusting timbre through the physical mechanics of singing technique, including articulators, oral cavity, and resonance

- Lips
- Tongue
- Teeth – space
- Palate
- Resonance location/sensation
- Also…

2) Imitation—adjusting timbre through free play exercises where singers imitate sounds from the natural and inanimate world around them. Borrow descriptors from the material world, which is a variation on the visual realm.

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3) Onomatopoetic descriptors—adjusting timbre by employing verbiage that is related specifically to sound, and not borrowed from the realms of touch, taste, or sight.

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4) Rehearsal techniques

- Vocalises

- Vocal modeling

5) Gestures

- Dialing in a vowel — When the choir aligns, the room responds!

- Using the hand as a corollary for the mouth

- Create-your-own signals for use on the podium

Conclusions and questions