Vocal training is crucial for the appropriate development of young singers. Many of the performers of popular music do not model good vocal habits and so it is essential that directors teach good singing to the choral singers. This vocal training must include attention to posture and breath management as well as tone generation. This writer addressed breath management in the article *Core Content: Breathing to Sing* published in the BGMN in May 2002.

Once the choral director has taught or reviewed with student singers the process of breath management that is the foundation of beautiful singing, the next step will be to address the singing tone. This process employs two basic concepts: *resonance*, or forward placement; and a *lifted soft palate*.

Singers often identify *resonance* with the vibrating or ringing sensations around the nose, mouth, lips and eyes. Many teachers refer to this region as the “mask” and to these sensations as “forward placement.” Students may easily experience these sensations by humming with the mouth and teeth closed. You can assess the students by asking them where they feel the “buzz,” or sensations when they hum. The students will often point to their noses or around their mouths. Experiment with altering the location of the sensations by changing how the students hum. Humming with the lips closed but opening the teeth may cause the vibration to migrate more into the mouth. This begins to approximate the sensations that the students should feel when actually singing.
Another change in sensation occurs when the singers phonate, sing, on an “NG” sound by lifting the back of the tongue and gently touching the soft palate in the back of the mouth. This activity focuses the vibration intensely in the sinuses behind the nose and offers the singers a chance to feel and remember the upper resonance so necessary for fine singing. A series of vocal exercises may be used to reinforce these sensations.

Singing five-note, ascending and descending scale patterns on an “NG,” while the mouth is placed in the shape of various vowels or the words of the text, will help integrate these resonant sensations into the singing voice. In addition, ascending and descending “sirens” of a fifth or an octave, or singing arpeggios of the same span on an “NG” or a hum may help the singers sense the changes in the resonance as they ascend and descend in pitch. This will also allow the students the opportunity to learn how to “place” various pitches in the resonance. You might alternate the exercises in order to reinforce the various sensations for the students. This will help ensure a commonly understood vocabulary when you and your students discuss vocal tone in future rehearsals.

Some students may not be immediately aware of the vibrating sensations in an “M” or “NG.” You will need to help these students, through sound imitation, to locate these sensations. One cause of the problem may be the lack of appropriate breath flowing through the sound. Through an increased airflow achieved by increasing the speed as well as the amount of breath, the students may begin to feel the vibration. Sometimes, simply speaking the sounds loudly will increase the resonance enough for the students to recognize the sensations. Then they may be encouraged to apply that same breath energy to the singing, allowing them to become aware of the same sensations.
Once your students are aware of the breath and allow it to flow freely through the upper resonance without constricting the throat, they are ready to integrate the resonance into vowels. The closed vowel [i] as in “me” may provide the least amount of change in sensation as the singers open from either the “NG” or the “M”. Beginning on an “NG” and opening to an [i] on each pitch of a descending 5-note pattern will allow the young singer to integrate forward resonance into the [i] vowel.

Through this process, you will need to listen carefully for nasal sounds. Such sounds indicate that the vibration is in and not behind the nose. The student singers should sing each of the vowels, closed to open, [i], [e] as in meh, [a] as in mah, [o] as in moh, and [u] as in moo, listening and sensing as each of the sounds become resonant. Using single pitches in the beginning, singers may work with an “NG” or hum and moving through each of the vowels. Or, they may alternate the “NG” or hum through the sequence of the vowels, again on a single pitch. Once they recognize a consistent resonance, the singers may begin to work the vowels in ascending/descending patterns, or on patterns that include small skips, such as octave arpeggios, at various tempi. The resonant core of each of the vowels should be consistent and even, made without any tension or squeezing of the throat or tongue.

The second component of beautiful tone is the warmth and roundness created by a lifted soft palate combined with the slightly released or lowered larynx, also known as “O space.” Your singers may experience this sensation through several exercises, such as the first sensations of a yawn (keeping the tongue behind the lower front teeth and relaxed), or those of a slow inhalation through both the nose and the mouth such as a snore. They may also experience this opening and rounding sensation by slightly separating their back teeth, particularly while singing [a] or [o]. This may help add
roundness and depth to their forward resonant sound. Teachers, in their haste to create a “mature” sound, may over-emphasize the “O-space” without the balancing effect of forward or upper resonance. Such tone generation may lead to throaty, “hooty” and/or out-of-tune singing by sacrificing the forward or upper placement. This upper or forward placement adds overtone resonance to the voice assisting the tuning of an individual voices as well as an ensemble.

The exercises used to help teach this balance will depend on the taste and tonal perception of the teacher. Some teachers prefer a darker sound that uses more “O-space” and roundness in the back of the mouth. Others like a brighter color that uses more upper resonance in the mix of sound. Descending 5-note patterns on syllables including open vowels such as “Yah,” “Yoh,” or “Yoo” will assist the integration of the openness and roundness into the sound.

Different styles of music may require different vocal tone colors as well. For example, Renaissance music often employs a brighter tone color, or more upper resonance, than does Romantic music. For the sake of the young singer’s vocal health, however, this writer suggests that inexperienced choirs should sing with healthy focused tone using a natural balance of forward placement with a lifted soft palate.

There are several vocal tone problems that can be quickly addressed with appropriate attention to the balance of resonance and “O space.” One problem common with young singers is “airy” tone. This may be addressed by working for an increase in breath flow combined with more forward placement. You might have the students sing ascending and descending “sirens” on an [i] or an [o] that move higher in pitch to help them experience and sensate the clear tone balanced by breath and resonance.
A second and related issue with airy (or “breathy”) tone is the range of the voice part. Young female singers typically have clear tone in the upper register and in the chest register with airy tone in the middle register. Many voice parts in recently published music place the young singers in the middle or lower registers. This may reinforce both an inappropriate use of chest voice, as well as an airy tone. Placing the singers’ voices in appropriate ranges will often clear up the airy tone as the forward resonance begins to work with the head-dominated tone. For most young female singers the most desirable range is the octave from D1 to D2.

Another vocal problem is out-of-tune singing. Flat singing is often caused by a lack of forward placement in the tone, an overbalance of “O-space” in the tone, and/or a lack of appropriate breath support and flow. Working for an even, consistent and free breath flow while singing with a brighter quality (i.e., more forward placement) will often fix the problem. An over-pressuring of the breath and tension or squeezing in the throat may cause sharp singing. Continuing to work for freedom in the breath flow and a release of the tension in the throat by working the “O-space” may help with this problem.

Lack of appropriate “O-Space” may also contribute to nasal singing (see discussion above). Young singers will sometimes confuse the sensations behind the nose with those in the nose. Remind them to lift the soft palate by taking a quick breath with an open mouth. This may help move the vibrations from within the nose to the proper upper resonance. Singing on an “NG” will increase awareness of the upper resonance, as the back of the tongue gently lifts in the back of the mouth and touches the palate. This same upper resonance should be maintained when releasing the tongue into the various vowel shapes.
For many young singers, their choral experience provides the only vocal instruction they will ever receive. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the choral director to work each day at developing the voices of the young singers. Teachers must remember that voices will change and grow with age and practice. They must select music that will assist vocal development, and not cause problems that may limit the further vocal growth of the student. If there are to be excellent high school choirs in the future, then focus must be placed on middle school vocal development. The same is true for middle school and elementary choirs. Vocal growth and development must be part of the core curriculum of every choir. Directors may have to make choices regarding repertory and vocal development for the short run. This may mean doing less repertory or slightly less difficult repertory immediately as the students learn how to use their voices. However, if they will teach their young students to sing appropriately, the door to an expanded repertory will swing wide open and opportunities will abound. Teachers will, quite literally, grow their choirs. Teachers must accept the challenge of teaching singing. The future of choral singing depends upon our making appropriate choices as to what is taught in the rehearsal each day.