

Guiding the Male Changing Voice

Helping Singers Find Their Tenor and Bass Voices

This Quicksheet explores ways to understand the male changing voice and to guide singers as they find their tenor and bass voices in children's and youth choirs. These approaches also apply to children's and adult voices.

Language and Guidance

When working with singers, adapt gender language to your situation. Using voice parts can be an approach, including "future tenors and basses" for those whose voices will be changing.

Teachers/directors can use a variety of labels for different parts of the voice. "Head voice" works better for some than "falsetto" to avoid the root word "false." Directors might consider "head voice," "chest voice," and "mixed voice."

Children's choir directors with "future tenors and basses," whose voices have not begun to change, can help the singer prepare by:

1. Informing the singers that in a few years, their voices will lower.
2. Vocalize singers regularly in their lower voices – perhaps down to the G below middle C – without pushing or damaging their voices.

The male voice changes at different ages for different boys. In addition to change in pitch, the vocal quality itself changes, frequently with a husky or breath timbre.

In terms of range, the "future tenor/bass" might lose high notes first OR add low notes first. As the range changes, the singer may temporarily lose one or several notes in the middle of their range; the notes cannot be forced but will eventually return.

It is helpful to keep a sense of "head voice" going throughout the process.

One of the greatest challenges for the singer and the director/teacher is helping an uncertain singer match pitch.

Note: Although flexible, generally it works better for soprano/alto directors to sing in their comfortable range and for the future tenor/bass to sing an octave lower. Tenor/bass directors who have head voice may have fewer challenges helping the singer match pitch.

Matching Pitch

One approach to helping an uncertain singer match pitch when singing:

- Use standard breathing exercises; inexperienced singers may get dizzy so they may be seated.
- Move from breathing to hissing or other sounds.
- Echo percussive sounds, e.g., ch-ch-ch
- Echo sirens, glides, and other vocal sounds using a wide range of general pitches. Depending on the singer, echoing animal sounds from a moo to hee-haw to a chirp may help the singer explore vocal ranges without needing to match pitch.
- Spend more time preparing in head voice than in chest voice if the singer can sing comfortably in head voice.
- Teach a simple song with very limited range. Initially don't worry about pitch. The melody of "Come, Bring Your Burdens to God" (Hymn No. 851 in the "Glory to God" hymnbook) works well as it has only three pitches in the melody. Using Hymnary.org, you might print it in several keys lower than the original.
- When the singer knows the song, ask the singer to sing a few notes; if the singer has challenges matching pitch, it might be in a different key/range. Go to the singer's key. Help the singer securely sing in that key several times. Then try going up and/or down a few steps; frequently it's a case of going up as many singers go to their lower voices initially.
- Sometimes it might be helpful for the uncertain singer to sing more strongly – getting the air ("energy") going to phonate pitch more clearly. Be cautious not to wear out the singer; 10-15 minutes might be good for most singers.
- As the singer determines what range is most comfortable that day, the director may help the singer with other aspects of singing well, including phrasing and diction.
- Always be positive and encouraging as this is a vulnerable time for the singer.

Another approach is to use the first eight words of the refrain for "Jingle Bells": "Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way."

- Play a triad followed immediately with the melody for starting on the middle pitch. (Example: Play an F major triad (FAC) with the top note being middle C. Then play – A-A-A---A-A-A---A-C-F-G-A.)
- Quickly move – jumping to higher and lower triads, but within the general range of a developing tenor/bass. Initially, don't worry about their matching pitch; as they get more confident, the director will have a better feel where the most comfortable range is for the singer.

Over the following rehearsals or "informal lessons," guide the tenor/bass in expanding range – developing head voice and chest voice – and then mixing them around middle C.

Anthem Suggestion

One anthem that works well with singers – both young changing voices and older choirs (senior-adults) whose singers have limited ranges due to aging is "Psalm 139" by Allen Pote, published by Choristers Guild: CGA-610.

Although it's voiced for SATB voices, it can be adapted to choirs missing a voice part. Except for the final "Amen," it's always in two parts – either SA-TB or ST-AB. Allen Pote did a masterful job composing this anthem for smaller choirs with limited range, including male changing voices. The tenor part works well for a male in his first stage of change – only going down to the G below middle C – with only the D (a step above middle C) used occasionally. Those singers whose voices are further developing have some lower notes, but still very comfortable.

If there are not enough treble singers to sing SA, the middle section (measures 15-22) can be sung unison using the soprano part.

Use Multiple Approaches

Similar to other aspects of teaching, preparing several approaches can be helpful. Additionally, something tactile can help, such as:

- Breathing – using a Hoberman sphere ball – the singer holding it to imitate inhalation/exhalation.
- Breathing and pitch – using a drinking straw for Semi-Occluded Vocal Tract (SOVT) exercises.
- Phrasing – expanding a large rubber band as one sings a phrase
- Pitch – playing one or several notes on a piano or Orff instrument

Remain positive and encouraging as you help a singer find their voice!

Writer: Tom Granum has served various Presbyterian Churches as Director of Music and Organist.
2026 Worship and Music Conference Interest Session Leader

www.presbysmusic.org

www.pcusa.org/formationresources



Office of Christian
Formation

