

# LISTENING WITHOUT BIAS: THE SOUL OF ENSEMBLE

PHASE TWO, WEEK TWO



# A MESSAGE FROM MR. MCMULLEN

During this time of Remote Learning, one of the core concepts we as the High School Choral Faculty of the West Ada School District would like to achieve is instilling a passion for the Choral Arts in our students. I believe one of the most important indicators of this passion is achieved by encouraging the consumption of our art form. By actively listening to choral music you increase your:

1. Breadth of Knowledge of the repertoire; by being exposed to a wider variety of genres than can be presented in an ensemble year
2. Depth of Knowledge of the repertoire; by being exposed to more content from similar genres than can be presented in an ensemble year
3. Knowledge and Understanding of the music theory incorporated into the repertoire; especially your understanding of harmonic practices
4. Ability to gain better understanding of your role in ensemble

# BIAS: THE OBSTACLE IN COMPARISON

One of the major challenges in listening objectively is overcoming personal bias. It is easy to encounter bias (noun, prejudice in favor of or against one thing, person, or group compared with another, usually in a way considered to be unfair) when listening to choral music.

Examples of some biases that can surface in listening are:

1. Breadth of compositions – Written choral music spans almost 2000 years of human history and is a constantly evolving art form. New compositional devices replace older traditions as the art continues to advance
2. Too many “moving parts” make it easy to get away from fair comparison. Distracted listeners often gravitate towards the best recording, best ensemble, best conductor, or best interpretation.
3. Familiarity with a specific aspect of a composition, such as: genre, composer, language, tonality preference (major, minor, modal), accompaniment, religion/faith, culture.
4. Recording quality – live vs. studio

**Side discussion:** What other forms of bias can or should be included on this list?

# SIDEBAR: BIAS VERSUS PREFERENCE

We ALL have preference (noun, a greater liking for one alternative over another or others). Preference is necessary to function in society (and for society to function). Could you imagine getting ready for school in the morning without preference? On the surface, being able to wake up without any preconceived notions might seem interesting or fun. But think about how many decisions you have to make every morning just to get out the door. Now imagine trying to make all those decisions without any preference. Exhausting, right? Just listing the decisions I have to make before I leave my house makes me want to take a nap...

The trick is to not allow your PREFERENCES to become BIASES; to be open to other philosophies and possibilities.

**Side discussion:** What are your preferences or biases in listening to choral music?



# COMBATING BIAS

So once you recognize potential bias, how do you combat it?  
Here are some techniques I use:

1. Continue working to recognize differences between preference and bias
2. Educate yourself by listening to multiple examples, accessing a score, or looking up a translation
3. Acknowledging there may not be a “right answer”
4. Conversing with others to understand perspective.

**Side discussion:** What are other techniques to combat biases when listening to choral music?

# PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

So I have included three listening exercises on the subsequent pages. To remove some of the variables, they are all professional recordings by the incomparable British ensemble Voces8. I have also added some descriptive terms (glossary on the last page of the presentation) and leading questions that can help refine your listening skills. I look forward to speaking to you about your thoughts! I am also available by email: [mcmullen.seth@westada.org](mailto:mcmullen.seth@westada.org) (please allow a few days for a response – email volume is OUT OF CONTROL right now!)

-McMullen



# TRACK ONE: THE SOUND OF SILENCE

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KXJNLb71VH4>

Paul Simon, arr. Alexander L'Estrange

Form: Strophic

Texture: Homophonic

1. Which voice (SATB) has the initial melody?
2. In which verse does the melody move to a different part? To what voice?
3. What are the lyrics when the alto gets the melody?
4. Label the voice parts of each singer in the video (SATB) – Top row left to right, middle row left to right, bottom row left to right
5. Match (sing in your own octave) the Soprano note in the last chord. Alto. Tenor. Bass.



# TRACK TWO: BEATI QUORUM VIA

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L9zggq5qrNGw>

Charles Villiers Stanford

Form: Ternary Form (ish)

Texture: Imitative Polyphony, with some elements of Homophony

1. When the lower choir makes their first entrance imitating the upper voice choir are they singing the exact same notes, an octave displaced, or at some other interval ?
2. How many voice parts are in this song?
3. Find a translation of the text online. What language is it?

# TRACK THREE: STARS

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ngqbf6mNpuE>

Eriks Esenvalds

Form: Through-composed

Texture: Homophonic

1. How many parts can you identify at the “thickest” chord in the song? (Hint: it occurs at 2:12, the word is “dome”)
2. Is the melody ever NOT in the Soprano?
3. Match (sing in your own octave) the Soprano note in the last chord. Alto. Tenor. Bass.

“EXTRA-CREDIT”

Continue “surfing” Voces8 on youtube – which song (not listed in this presentation) of theirs is your favorite and why?



# GLOSSARY OF MUSICAL TERMS USED

## Terms pertaining to Texture

1. **Homophony, or homophonic:** n, the texture in which a primary part is supported by one or more additional strands that flesh out the harmony and often provide rhythmic contrast. This differentiation of roles contrasts with equal-voice polyphony and monophony
2. **Polyphony, or polyphonic:** n, the texture of simultaneously combining a number of parts, each forming an individual melody and harmonizing with each other.
3. **Monophony, or monophonic:** n, the texture consisting of a single musical line, without accompaniment.
4. **Heterophony, or heterophonic:** n, the texture of two or more musicians simultaneously performing slightly different versions of the same melody. Each version would be characterized as improvised or ornamented versions of the melody as opposed to harmonized versions of a melody as in polyphonic music.
5. **Imitative:** adj, the repetition in a second voice or part of a theme, motif, or phrase presented by a first voice or part. The first presentation of the theme is called the antecedent, the answer is called the consequent, and is usually a different pitch from the antecedent. The antecedent usually continues while the consequent is coming in, and the consequent need not imitate the antecedent exactly, but may vary the tune slightly.

# GLOSSARY OF MUSICAL TERMS USED, CONTINUED

## Terms pertaining to Form

1. **Strophic:** Song structure in which every verse (strophe) of the text is sung to the same musical tune.
  2. **Ternary Form:** (also known as ABA, AABA, or Song Form) Three-part structure of music; a theme introduced (and then often repeated), a second concept is introduced (often called a consequence, the bridge, or the development), and then the original theme is returned.
  3. **Through-composed:** Song structure that is composed from beginning to end without repetitions of any major sections; each verse having its own, unique melody.
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