

The Neutral Syllable:

Sending a Soundscape of Subliminal Messages



by Anthony Bernarducci, PhD

Finding the most productive pedagogical approach to introducing a new piece to your choral ensemble can be a difficult decision. The style and difficulty of the piece, sight-reading abilities of the ensemble and even the time available will play a role in determining the best strategy. Ideally we would have time to introduce the concepts that will challenge the ensemble through avenues such as warm-ups and listening exercises; how-

ever, there is not always time to complete these supplemental activities.

There are three basic options when starting a piece: some begin on text, others strictly on solfège or numbers and finally those on a neutral syllable. Each of the strategies has merit for different educational purposes. When starting a piece, it is important not to confound the learning process by asking the singers to accomplish too many tasks at



beginning stages of the learning process can be beneficial, particularly to a beginning ensemble by giving them a greater chance to follow along as they learn how to read music. Using text can also be an important wrap-up exercise after a rehearsal spent mostly on solfège or neutral syllables, giving singers a realistic taste of what they have accomplished.

This article discusses the benefits of using the neutral syllable not only as an introductory tool but more importantly as a way to integrate the musicality called for by a specific piece from the onset of the learning process. The early stage of learning a new piece is often very technical. Staying on this stage for too long can cause ensembles to lose interest because students never see the larger musical picture. After all, the musicality is the reason that the students are in the choir. The neutral syllable has the versatility

to simplify the learning process while subliminally setting up musical aspects such as dynamics, tone, color, style and vowels, thereby building in the aural image of the piece from the start.

Below is a list of key concepts addressed through use of the neutral syllable. The musical example that follows will offer suggestions on how to practically implement them.

Key Concepts to Consider When Choosing a Neutral Syllable

1. Color of the music (bright versus dark)
2. Dynamics and overall character of the music
3. Problematic or recurring vowel that needs reinforcement
4. Articulation and texture of the music
5. Error detection for the conductor and independence for the singers

Suggested Use of Selected Vowels and Consonants

| Vowel | Dark/Bright | Dynamics | Articulations |
|-----------|-------------|----------|------------------|
| EE (Meet) | Bright | Mf - F | Short or Pointed |
| AH (Hot) | Bright | Mf - F | Expansive |
| OH (Open) | Dark | P - Mf | Legato |
| OO (Food) | Dark | P - Mf | Legato |

once. Expecting them to sing accurate notes and rhythms all on text from the first downbeat is an uphill battle that will only end in frustration for both the conductor and students. Using each of the three strategies at appropriate times enables layering of concepts, leading to mastery. The music literacy benefits to using solfège/numbers are obvious and often can tremendously speed up the note learning process. Using text at the

| Consonant | Dark/Bright | Dynamics | Articulations |
|-----------|-------------|----------|------------------|
| N | Dark | P - Mf | Legato |
| T | Bright | Mf - F | Short or Pointed |
| L | Dark | P - MF | Legato |
| D | Bright/Dark | Mf - F | Legato/Detached |
| Z | Bright | Mf - F | Marcato |

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You will notice that not all vowel types were included. Vowels such as the “Eh” create a diphthong; incorrect use of this vowel long term could cause further issues if not addressed. Additionally, with the exception of the consonant T, only voiced consonants were chosen to support resonance. Other consonants such as G or J were excluded because they would send the sound back while others such as W, B and R produce an excess amount of jaw movement. The vowels

and consonants listed in the charts above will promote resonance, focus the energy to the front of the mask and support the five key concepts previously listed.

In musical example *Dies Sanctificatus* (see next page), many of the five key concepts are present. Throughout this section, there are possibilities for different vocal colors and articulations, dynamic contrast, varied characters of individual lines and potential recurring vowel issues. In measure 30, both tenor

and bass are singing an ostinato pattern; however, the tenor line is marked slightly louder in addition to being more melodic than the bass line. As shown in the score, the suggested syllable for the tenors is “Noh” and for the basses “Noo.” The N for both will create the dark color and legato sound, but the “Oh” vowel for the tenors will increase the dynamic over the bass “Oo” vowel. The “Oh” will also give the tenors a more expansive vowel for the melodic nature of the ostinato pattern.

Musical Example 1: *Dies Sanctificatus* – Anthony Bernarducci

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"Noh" *mf*
qui - a ho-di - e de - scen - dit qui - a ho-di - e de - scen - dit

"Noo" *mp*
qui - a de - scen - dit

Next, in measure 32, the sopranos enter on the word *Lux*, which contains a vowel that could be a problematic recurring vowel throughout this section. The character of their line has more of a hovering quality intended to portray the great light that is descending to earth. For the sopranos, "Loo" is suggested to create that subdued hovering character.

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"Loo" *mp*
Lux lux mag - na

mp
qui - a ho-di - e de - scen - dit qui - a ho-di - e de - scen - dit

p
qui - a de - scen - dit

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Finally, the altos enter in measure 35 with yet another pattern that is at odds with the rhythm of the tenor section. This final entry from the altos is marked *mezzo forte* and is the driving force to the *forte* dynamic three measures later. In order to create a more forceful entry, the syllable "Di" is suggested, which leads into the expansive "DA" for the entire choir in measure 38 when all the individual ostinato patterns join for homophonic singing. In measure 40 into measure 41, you see the soprano, tenor and bass parts return to their previous syllable as the ostinato patterns reemerge. This time the altos join the sopranos on "Loo" since the character of their line is now that of the sopranos.

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"Di"

in - ter - ris Lux
qui - a ho - di - e de - scen - dit
qui - a ho - di - e de - scen - dit qui - a ho - di - e de - scen - dit
qui - a de - scen - dit

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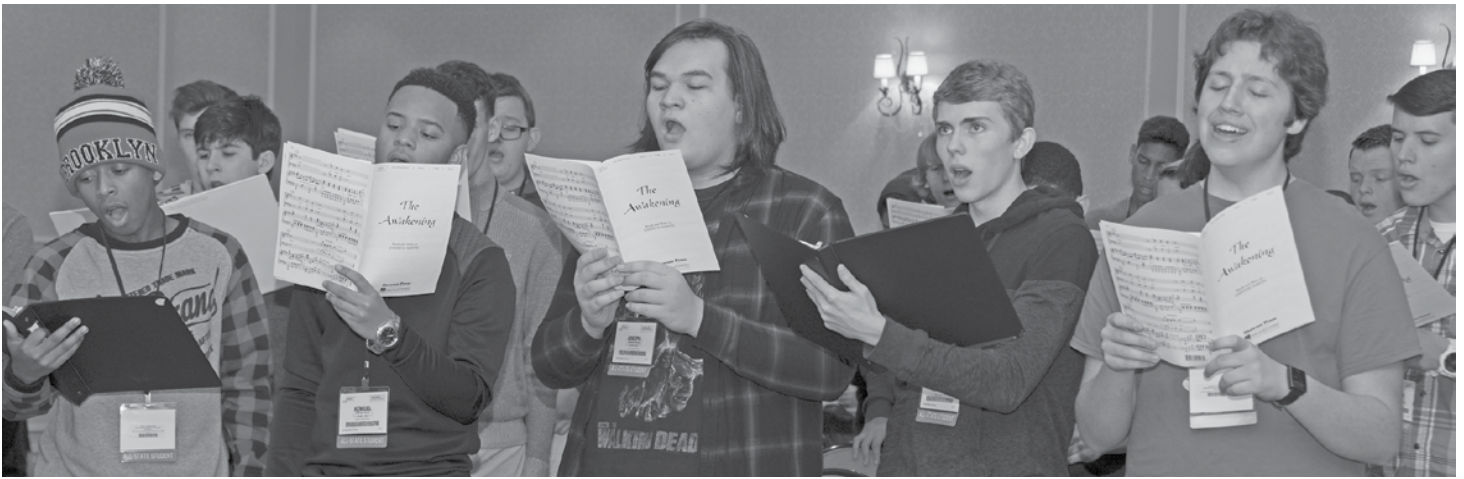
"Loo"

"Loo"

"Noh"

"Noo"

de - scen - dit de - scen - dit Lux
de - scen - dit de - scen - dit Lux
de - scen - dit de - scen - dit qui - a ho - di - e de - scen - dit
de - scen - dit de - scen - dit qui - a de -



38 *f*

"DA" *f* 3
 qui - a ho - di - e de - scen - dit de - scen - dit qui - a ho - di - e

"DA" *f* 3
 qui - a ho - di - e de - scen - dit de - scen - dit qui - a ho - di - e

"DA" *f* 3
 qui - a ho - di - e de - scen - dit de - scen - dit qui - a ho - di - e

"DA" *f* 3
 qui - a ho - di - e de - scen - dit de - scen - dit qui - a ho - di - e

The use of these different syllables in the early stages of rehearsal will incorporate many aspects of an aural image of this section. These sound concepts can then be transferred easily to the text when it is ready to be layered into the rehearsal process. In addition, having each of the voice parts on different neutral syllables will help the singers gain independence and aid the conductor with detecting errors. The neutral syllable is a versatile tool in the choral rehearsal at any level of choral singing. It will help to incorporate musicality from the first downbeat.

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