

All About Audiation

Some Suggestions for Choral Conductor-Teachers

by Stuart Chapman Hill, Ph.D.

You've heard the term before. You've used it in your teaching, perhaps, or furrowed your brow when Microsoft Word, wielding its scarlet squiggle, suggested the word was a misspelling: *audiation*. But what does it *really* mean to audiate, and how might a deeper understanding of audiation influence your teaching? In a recent NCMEA conference session about Edwin Gordon's Music Learning Theory (MLT) and its application in the choral classroom, I emphasized the importance of designing rehearsal activities that build singers' audiation skills – and, though that topic is too extensive to summarize in a brief journal article, I want to share a few quick ideas about how to make choral classrooms more audiation-friendly.

Audiation is a term Gordon coined to describe “the process of assimilating and comprehending (not simply rehearsing) music momentarily heard, performed, or performed sometime in the past.”¹ Audiation is more than imitation, memorization, or the ability to “play back” a melody or pattern in one's head; it's the ability to hold musical material in mind with deep comprehension of its tonal and rhythmic context. This core ability underlies all musical activities: singing, playing, composing, improvising, and everything else.

Many of our traditional practices in choral classrooms may not strengthen students' audiation abilities as well as we imagine. Gordon's theory anchors itself in the Pestalozzian notion of sound before sight, and I know in my own middle school classroom, my devotion to music literacy (read: ability to decode standard notation) pushed me to rush through the “sound” bit and straight to the “sight” – that is, right to teaching students to navigate notation. Gordon firmly reminds readers that notation itself is not music; it is simply a tool for recording musical ideas. As such, music literacy is much more than decoding notation. Before students can bring meaning to notation, they need to have developed sufficiently rich audiological vocabularies of internalized tonal and rhythm patterns.

Accordingly, one cornerstone of an MLT-informed classroom is the use of what Gordon called “learning sequence activities” (LSAs), or pattern instruction, and choral students could benefit greatly from the inclusion of LSAs among rehearsal routines. In these brief teaching episodes (not longer than ten



minutes), through singing and chanting back and forth both with the whole class *and* with individuals (which is key), teachers guide students through the tonal and rhythmic building blocks that underlie most Western music, helping them to hear, echo, name, recognize, distinguish between, and (eventually) read in notation a sequence of patterns that contribute to a rich audiological vocabulary.

Full discussion of LSAs is beyond the scope of this article, but books by Gordon² as well as MLT scholar and practitioner Dr. Eric Bluestine³ help explain the logic of the sequence, and curricular materials from the *Jump Right In* series⁴ lay out patterns to teach and how to teach them. Further, workshops offered by the Gordon Institute of Music Learning provide specific professional development for teachers wishing to incorporate these activities.⁵ Notably, teachers who explore the *Jump Right In* curriculum will discover that what is often called sight reading (or, in Gordon terms, generalization – symbolic) comes rather late in the skill learning sequence and associated LSAs. Teachers may find, in using LSAs, they do not teach sight reading as early in the year or curriculum as they have before. Fear not: the time spent front-loading students' audiological vocabularies is worth the investment, as it ensures singers truly are ready to bring musical meaning *to* notation (rather than struggle to extract meaning *from* it) when the time comes.

In addition to incorporating a program of sequential pattern instruction like LSAs, there are a few simple strategies teachers can employ to help strengthen students' audiation. Remember that audiation is all about comprehension of musical context – and yet, how often do we launch into rehearsal of a passage without calling students' attention to its tonal and rhythmic contexts? Further, students' ability to audiate depends on exposure to music in a wide variety of modes and meters – and yet, how often does the music in our classrooms venture very far outside the realms of major tonality or duple meter?

Here are a few simple tweaks that might help us all improve on these points:

- **Use warm-ups as an opportunity to teach rote songs in a variety of tonalities and meters.** Before students can learn specific patterns via LSAs, they need rich exposure to them elsewhere. Spice up your normal repertoire of major tonality warm-ups and throw in a song in Phrygian mode or in an asymmetric meter (or unusual combined meter, to use Gordon's terminology). Further, though it may frustrate your students at first, teach these songs without text, singing on a neutral syllable, since students' ears will be drawn to lyrics, not tonal and rhythmic materials, if text is present.

- **Always establish tonality and/or meter before rehearsing a passage.** When the teacher chants or sings a pattern that establishes meter or tonality (examples can be found in the *Reference Handbook for Using Learning Sequence Activities*) before rehearsing a piece, students are led not just to learn their notes, but also to relate them to the contexts that underlie them.

- **Help students find the resting tone.** Being able to identify a song's tonal center, or resting tone, is a crucial skill that is built into LSAs, but can be reinforced with thoughtful rehearsal strategies. Try singing a passage from one of the pieces you are rehearsing and pausing at random times to ask students to sing the resting tone on a neutral syllable. While working with one section of the choir, have the other sections sing a tonic drone or ostinato.

- **Use rhythmic ostinati to reinforce rhythmic understanding.** Again, while rehearsing with one section of the choir, involve the rest of the choir in a rhythmic ostinato, such as chanting the eighth-note pulse on rhythm syllables. Pause every now and then, while rehearsing a passage, to ask a student to

chant its underlying microbeats. Such strategies not only keep all students engaged when you need to focus on a small group, but also help students connect, again and again, with the underlying rhythmic/metric materials of the piece being rehearsed.

These are just a few preliminary suggestions, and teachers who devote themselves to close study of MLT will undoubtedly discover more ways its principles can be applied in choral classrooms. As Eric Bluestine emphasized in *The Ways Children Learn Music*, MLT is "open-ended and incomplete,"⁶ and its further refinement depends on continued practice and research. Whether these ideas inspire a deeper, sustained curiosity about MLT or simply add a few useful tools to your kit, I hope they help you feel more equipped to ensure that your choral classroom, like Music Learning Theory (like *music*, for that matter!) is all about audiation.

Endnotes

1 Edwin E. Gordon, *Learning Sequences in Music: A Contemporary Music Learning Theory*, 2012 ed. (Chicago: GIA, 2012), 3.

2 Ibid.

3 Eric Bluestine, *The Ways Children Learn Music: A Introduction and Practical Guide to Music Learning Theory*, rev. ed. (Chicago: GIA, 2000).

4 Edwin E. Gordon, *Jump Right In: Tonal Register, Book 1*, rev. ed. (Chicago: GIA, 1990); Gordon, *Jump Right In: Rhythm Register, Book 1* rev. ed. (Chicago: GIA, 1990); Gordon, *Reference Handbook for Using Learning Sequence Activities*, 2001 revision (Chicago: GIA, 2001).

5 Visit www.giml.org for information about these "Professional Development Levels Courses."

6 Bluestine, *The Ways Children Learn Music*, 8.

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