

## Choir Hazards

by Kara Quello

I love choir! I started singing in Sunday School choir as early as I can remember and at age 10 I decided that I wanted to attend Pacific Lutheran University so I could sing in The Choir of the West, which I eventually did. Then there was the Seattle Symphony Choir, the Willamette Master Chorus, and St. Paul's Episcopal Church choir.



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As for choirs for kids in my town now, elementary school choirs for every grade feed the enormous middle school programs. Those programs feed into the high schools, where the top concert groups are made up of 150 or more kids. It is just as cool to be in choir as it is to

play football or volleyball, and often the quarterback is in the bass section.

I know many of the directors personally and have a great deal of respect for all of them. I feel dizzy at the amount of work they put in every day, including having to give grades! The directors want their students to take private voice lessons, the kids want to take private voice lessons, and that's where I come in.

What has developed is what I like to call choir hazards. I talk about choir hazards daily in the studio. Listed on this page are some of the hazards that we face, both old and common, and unique and new. Over achievers are often the kids who land in my studio, and are often the most susceptible to these hazards.

I get it – I get why many of these techniques are used and why some of them work! These issues also seem to evolve with current trends. For example, a few years back a choir director wouldn't dream of having the kids MOVE while singing- now it's all the rage to loosen them up so that they smile, engage, emote, and produce a freer sound. I am so grateful for all of the work that is done in the classroom and the foundation that work gives our young musicians. It is our job as private teachers to teach our students when it is appropriate to use these techniques, and when it is not – sometimes NEVER.

Kara Quello is an independant teacher in the Salem, Oregon area. She performs all over the area in a diversity of styles, and teaches all ages and genres.

### A List of Most Common Hazards

**Directing Oneself** – Especially section leaders. Students are encouraged to feel the beat with their bodies or their hands and arms, much like a director. The hazard is not being able to stop this habit when performing.

**Choir Neck** – The singer wants that director to know he is engaged and really going for those notes. The hazard is poor posture and alignment, a strangled and strained larynx, and it is unattractive to the audience in either a group or solo setting.

**H's Where They Don't Belong** – I am known in town for being the H Police with my singers. I often hear directors ask the choir to put an H in front of a vowel, or to separate moving notes in a run.

**Headlights Up!** – There is a choir director who won at state a few years ago who STILL says this to her high school girls. Sigh. It can create too much tension between the shoulder blades, too high a sternum, and throw the head forward. For boys, I would call it "Military Stance".

**From the Diaphragm** – I challenge choir directors today to explain what they expect from the choir; what and where the diaphragm is, how it is shaped, and how it works.

**Stagger Breathing with Ghosts** – The solo student won't take a breath in a logical place at the end of a phrase and instead will breathe in the middle of it.

**Dark Singing** – The choir director wants a more "mature sound" so the singer pulls her larynx as low as possible (especially rampant in girls). Or the choir director wants to avoid bright singing so that the singer won't stick out and will blend with the section.

**Three-Finger AH** – Directors are talking to the singer who couldn't fit a thin dime between his lips. The over achiever will take his already adequate or perfect AH, and overdo it, thus creating a muted sound with a pulled back tongue and larynx.

**Squeezing Out the Breath** – Leaning back, squeezing the buttocks, or collapsing the sternum and bringing the shoulders forward.

**Loud and Fast Breath Onset (one of my favorites)** – Most notably at the beginning of a song, the director gives the downbeat and lifts her arms with gusto just before the first note and we hear and see chests raise, a loud breath, and larynx's rise and tighten, and out comes the first notes!

**Belly Breathing vs. Rib Breathing** – It is hard to go to around 150 kids per choir and make sure they are breathing right. It is easier to see that a student is breathing from the belly than the ribs, and what ensues is that singers think they are breathing correctly but strengthening all the wrong muscles. Even in private lessons in college, I was only taught one technique, and didn't learn to use all that was available to me until I was 30.