

CREATIVE SIGHTSINGING

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In his editorial in the premier issue of the *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* Michael R. Rogers identifies several major trends and issues that have arisen in the teaching of music theory during the past two decades.¹ Although theory teachers have embraced and, in turn, rejected a number of new approaches in recent years, very few have had any lasting effect on the way sightsinging is taught; the traditional method of reading through a series of graded melodies is still preferred, or at least practiced, by most teachers. The purpose of this article is to present a new approach to teaching sightsinging, called "creative sightsinging."² It is a performance-based method that offers an alternative to the conventional "rehearsal method" of teaching sightsinging.

In Part I, the basic procedures of creative sightsinging and examples for classroom use are presented. Part II examines one of the most important issues in teaching sightsinging that might lead the aural-skills teacher to consider an alternative method such as creative sightsinging. The intent of this discussion is not to abandon the benefits of a systematic approach to teaching sightsinging. Rather, its aim is to show how these benefits can be enhanced by the addition of procedures designed to develop creativity where it is needed most—in the classroom. Rupert Thackray underlines this need nicely in a pertinent article on "aural training" in *The Australian Journal of Music Education*:

So far as 'aural training' is concerned, I believe that most teachers would do well to develop a much broader approach than has been seen. If it has to continue to be regarded as an isolated study, at least an attempt could be made to base these activities more on 'real' music and not entirely on 'exercises'.³

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PART I

The primary activity of creative sightsinging is the elaboration by the class of melodies in increasingly complex ways as opposed to simply reading through a larger number of melodies during each class. One of the principal activities is structured “melody-based improvisation” in which the goal is to create a response to the original melody.⁴ Because this response is often a contrapuntal one, melodies that lend themselves to simple imitative procedures (e.g., canons and rounds) provide some of the best models. Other techniques include ostinati, pedal points, antiphonal and responsorial singing, descant, and textural variation in part-singing.

In the following section, several examples are presented as they might be used in class. Our purpose is to encourage teachers to see the variety of approaches available for teaching any aspect of aural skills.

Folk melodies

The vast body of American folk hymns and songs offers one of the richest sources of melodies for creative sightsinging. Because many of them are pentatonic (or hexatonic), and therefore lack the syntactical constraints of diatonic melodies, they can be sung in canon easily and ostinati can be devised quickly in class from fragments of the melody itself. For example, the American folk hymn *New Concord* (see Figure 1) might be performed by the class in the following way:

1. The melody should first be sung by the class several times in unison.
2. Next, the melody might be sung against one or more ostinato figures derived from motives of the melody (Figure 2).
3. The melody also can be sung in canon (the second voice enters where marked) against the continuing ostinati.
4. Finally, a countermelody can be sung against the original melody (Figure 3).

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Figure 1. New Concord.



Figure 2.



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Figure 3. New Concord.



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Figure 3. con't.



This example illustrates many of the basic principles of creative sightsinging. First, the original melody is sung in unison until its structure is clear to the class because the melody itself is the source of all subsequent elaborations. Second, only one elaboration is added at a time to create complex textures from simple components. Third, ostinati similar to those provided in Figure 2 can be composed by the class using motives of the original melody, thus integrating aspects of analysis and composition into the aural-skills experience. The countermelody presented in Step 4—which could actually be introduced at any stage in the process—can also be composed by the class or, as in Figure 3, an existing countermelody such as the hymn tune *Foundation* can be used.

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The use of canon in Step 3 is an important aspect of creative sightsinging, since creative sightsinging is more linear than homophonic in concept and practice. The pedagogical purpose for this use of imitation is to encourage students to hear and sing independent lines. Singing in canon is not only an effective way to introduce the basic principles of counterpoint, but it also provides an important bridge from monophony to the complexities of polyphony.

Ostinati and pedal points are also simple, but effective, devices to teach part-singing. Further, they can be combined to produce an elaborate setting that is, at the same time, made up of relatively simple individual components. The ostinato figure itself can be sung by two different voices in imitation for an impressive-sounding effect.

Plainsong

Plainsong is another important, but often-overlooked, source of materials for sightsinging and provides a convenient opportunity to discuss the ecclesiastical modes (this discussion may be deferred until later for those who prefer). The limited vocal range and predominantly stepwise structure of these melodies makes them particularly useful in the early stages of teaching sightsinging. Also, the flexible rhythm of plainsong melodies provides a welcome contrast to the regular rhythmic schemes characteristic of the core of common-practice literature from which many students rarely stray.

The most effective methods for using plainsong in class are responsorial and antiphonal singing. For responsorial singing, a relatively easy plainsong such as *Divinum Mysterium* (see Figure 4) might be selected. The teacher or a member of the class sings each phrase of the melody in turn for the class to imitate. If the class is instructed to try to match every nuance of phrasing, articulation, and dynamic change, the activity becomes a valuable exercise in critical listening and singing.

For antiphonal singing the class could be divided in various ways: male and female, high and low voices, odd and even rows, etc. Each group then sings alternate phrases of the melody until the cadential Amen (rehearsal number 8 in Figure 4) is reached, at which point the entire class sings in unison. An attractive pedal effect can be created by having each group hold the last note of its phrase while the next phrase is sung. If the class is divided into high and low voices, for example, Figure 4 might be sung as follows:⁵ 1) low voices sing phrases 1, 3, and 5 holding the last note of each phrase; 2) high voices sing phrases 2, 4, and 6 holding the last note of each phrase; 3) both groups sing phrases 7 and 8.

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Figure 4. 13th-Century Plainsong



Chorales and hymns

Although not always in vogue among the trend-conscious, the collection of 371 chorale tunes harmonized by J.S. Bach is still one of the mainstays of sightsinging classes. Possibilities for creative sightsinging are often overlooked in four-part singing. A simple, but effective, procedure is textural variation achieved by combining various voice parts with the chorale tune. Rather than beginning with SATB, however, it can be effective to *end* with all four voices after singing the combination listed below:⁶

*								
S	S	S	S	T (mel.)	S (ten.)	S	S	
	B	A	T	B	T (mel.)	A	A	
		B	B		B	T	T	
							B	

The voice combination marked by the asterisk in the table above (sopranos sing the tenor part an octave higher while tenors sing the melody in their range against the bass line) results in an effective pairing of a men's duet with descant (compare Figures 5 and 6).

Figure 5. J.S. Bach: Aus meines Herzens Grunde.



Figure 6.



Improved scholarship in recent editions of hymnals now makes them an important source of melodies for creative sightsinging.⁷ The *Mennonite Hymnal* listed in the bibliography, for example, contains more than a half-dozen psalter hymns in their original settings, an equal number of chant-derived hymns, and more than twenty American hymn tunes.⁸ Reproductions and facsimiles of collections of shaped-note hymns such as *The Sacred Harp* open up a new genre for part-singing. The fugal tune *Northfield* is an excellent stylistic introduction to shaped-note hymns. *The Hymnal 1982* (Episcopal), which is also listed in the bibliography, contains a number of hymns such as *Resurrexit* (see Figure 7) by contemporary British and American composers. One of the problems facing sightsinging teachers today is how to bridge the gap between the common-practice period and the twentieth century. Melodies such as *Resurrexit* can make that transition easier. As can be seen in Figure 7, the first two phrases are a facile and easily-sung example of mode alternation: the first phrase in D major (or Ionian on D) is followed by a contrasting phrase in Dorian on D.

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Figure 7. Robert Sherwood Johnson: Ressurixit.



Choral octavos

Although many sightsinging teachers eventually accumulate their own supply of choral octavos, one of the best sources of twentieth-century materials for use in sightsinging classes is the choral library. Britten's setting of "Old Abram Brown" and The "Four Cumming Choruses" by Vincent Persichetti (listed in the bibliography) are typical of the many accessible twentieth-century examples of choral writing. "Old Abram Brown" is constructed entirely from the well-known folk song of the same name and can be sung easily by any first-term sightsinging class. "Four Cumming Choruses" is scored for two-part mixed voices, women's voices, or men's voices, and can be handled without difficulty by most sophomore sightsinging classes.⁹ Our experience using choral octavos to teach contemporary reading techniques indicates that they are infinitely more interesting and effective than the contrived examples of "twentieth-century music" contained in many sightsinging texts.

Rhythmic Reading

Developing the basic skills of rhythmic reading is normally one of the primary goals of the first term of the musicianship sequence. It is also an area in which a systematic teaching approach easily can be combined with creative activities.

First, all rhythmic exercises can be sung as well as tapped. Although tapping develops accuracy of attack, it leads to a distorted concept of duration. (Ask a class to sing a whole note in common time and invariably the "tappers" will sing a dotted half or shorter.) Unnecessary vocal tension caused by singing on the syllables "tee" or "tah" can be avoided by substituting "bah" or "bum."

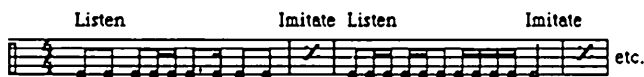
Whenever possible use examples composed by the class. Rhythmic duets can develop coordination between the hands. Combining simultaneous rhythmic and melodic reading with conducting improves coordination of mind, eye, ear, and body.¹⁰ These exercises might first involve singing

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a melody while conducting, then singing while also tapping a separate line of rhythm, and finally, by singing and tapping different lines while conducting.

Another useful creative exercise in rhythmic reading involves imitation of a solo (or soli) performance of a measure of rhythm, which is then imitated by the rest of the class. Trubitt and Hines make good use of this procedure in their book *Ear Training and Sight-Singing* (see Figure 8 below).¹¹ One way to develop confidence in weak readers is to assign the solo passages to them in advance so they will have time to prepare. Having students perform in small groups promotes independence and is less threatening than solo performance.

Figure 8.



PART II

Any decision to use a particular pedagogical approach such as creative sightsinging necessarily involves both practical and philosophical issues (e.g., literature vs. contrived exercises). Most textbook authors skirt this issue by including both types in an attempt to appeal to the largest possible market. (The obvious exceptions are literature-based sightsinging texts in which the melodies are arranged according to stylistic period.)¹² If the materials for sightsinging are arranged only according to difficulty and reflect no particular pedagogical approach, the sightsinging class can lapse into a pattern of unstructured practice unless teachers themselves impose some methodology.

Using examples taken from the literature involves certain trade-offs:¹³

1. It is difficult to assess objectively a student's progress and assign a grade at the end of the term when ungraded literature is used as the basis for sightsinging.

2. At first students may be uncomfortable when the assignment for the next period is no longer the familiar: "Look over melodies 25-50 in the

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sightsinging text for next time." In creative sightsinging, the assignment is more likely to be: "Go to the library, find three canons, and be prepared to teach them to the class."

3. It is easier for the teacher to pace a class according to a syllabus and determine when to introduce a new level of skills when graded exercises are used.

4. A literature-based approach requires more and better preparation by the teacher. Leafing through the sightsinging textbook on the way to class and making a mental note of which melodies the class sung last period is no longer adequate. For creative sightsinging, the teacher must assemble a core of materials for classroom use and be constantly on the alert for material that is suitable for "arranged singing."

Although there are conveniences to be gained from staying with exercise books, the advantages of using literature for sightsinging are significant:

1. Students, especially instrumentalists, are exposed to literature with which they might otherwise not become familiar.

2. An awareness of style is fostered and the art of interpretation becomes an integral part of the aural-skills experience.

3. Working with literature offers the class greater opportunity for musical expression, which, in turn, stimulates that elusive quality known as "musicality."

4. Students learn to use passages from the literature to develop technique and solve mechanical problems.

5. Finally, working with real music is infinitely more interesting than singing one exercise after another for fifty minutes.

Creative sightsinging is an unashamedly literature-based approach to teaching sightsinging. Some may think that only singers or choral directors have the requisite skills to use such an approach successfully because of the emphasis placed on choral singing by the class. In fact, theory teachers who are not trained singers will actually benefit most. When corrections are only made from the piano, the wrong signal is inadvertently sent to the class and the result is predictable: students avoid singing, at sight or otherwise.

Although it is not the primary objective of sightsinging classes to develop vocal quality, the acquisition of a good singing voice for the purposes of demonstration is certainly a desirable by-product. Habits of good vocal production can be integrated easily into the sightsinging class by devoting a few minutes at the beginning of each period to vocal warm-ups. For the non-vocalist, using an inexpensive monograph such as *Basic Vocal*

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Production by Ray Robinson¹⁴ or inviting a colleague or even a student to give the class a brief demonstration of the basics of singing can be invaluable.

For those teachers who are willing to incorporate elements of creative sightsinging into their classes, there are significant benefits to be realized. Devising simple accompaniments in class not only introduces basic arranging techniques but also nurtures spontaneity, an aspect of creativity that is often ignored under the pressure to develop specific skills. The emphasis placed on combining melodic lines and composing countermelodies in creative sightsinging reinforces the concept of tonal music as an inseparable combination of voice leading and harmony—a concept frequently neglected in harmony classes given the emphasis placed on Roman numerals.

Finally, creative sightsinging offers the student and the teacher a more interactive mode of learning. The most successful classroom teaching occurs when the teacher and students are actively involved in making music. If, in the process, complex skills and concepts are presented as a series of easily-learned steps, the results will be both gratifying and lasting.

It is appropriate to conclude by quoting again from Rupert Thackray's article on aural training:

The main purpose of this article . . . is a plea for a broader and more imaginative approach to aural work and to stress what has so often been said but not always borne out in practice, that aural experience is the essence of music and without it all musical skills and joys are impossible.¹⁵

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NOTES

¹Michael R. Rogers, Editorial in *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* (Spring 1987), pp. 1-4.

²The authors are indebted to Alice Parker for suggesting this approach. Ms. Parker's summer classes in choral arranging at Westminster Choir College and her primer, *Creative Hymn-Singing* (Chapel Hill: Hinshaw Music, Inc., 1976), are the basis for many of the procedures that are described and adapted for classroom use throughout the text.

³Rupert Thackery, "Some Thoughts on Aural Training," *Australian Journal of Music Education* (October 1975), p. 27. Thackray lists a number of valuable classroom activities that belong in every ear-training teacher's tool kit (see the suggested readings for the complete citation).

⁴Susan Merritt, "Text and Tune: Back to Basics with Alice Parker," *The Choral Journal* (September 1984), p. 5.

⁵For additional examples and performance possibilities, see Alice Parker, *Creative Hymn-Singing*, pp. 8-17.

⁶After Alice Parker, *Creative Hymn-Singing*, p. 31.

⁷The authors recognize that the use of hymns, even when the text is omitted, may be problematic at some state-supported institutions.

⁸Comparisons with the original source are nonetheless imperative. The leading tone (c#⁴) added in the penultimate measure of *Vernon* (No. 322) is apparently a modern instance of *musica ficta*.

⁹For additional examples, see the set of madrigals by Berger listed in the bibliography.

¹⁰The sing and tap exercises of this type in Paul Hindemith's *Elementary Training for Musicians* are ideal for use with advanced students.

¹¹Allen R. Trubitt and Robert S. Hines, *Ear Training and Sight-Singing* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1979).

¹²See, for example, Paul Cooper, *Dimensions of Sight Singing* (New York: Longman, Inc., 1981) and Norman Lloyd, Ruth Lloyd and Jan DeGaetani, *The Complete Sightsinger: A Stylistic and Historical Approach* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1980).

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¹³For another discussion of the relative merits of using literature instead of exercises, see Michael R. Rogers, *Teaching Approaches in Music Theory* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), p. 136.

¹⁴Ray Robinson, *Basic Vocal Production* (Chapel Hill: Hinshaw Music, Inc., 1977).

¹⁵Thackray, "Some Thoughts on Aural Training," p. 30.

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*For a more comprehensive list of suggested readings on ear training and sightsinging, see Rogers, *Teaching Approaches in Music Theory*, pp. 205-213.