

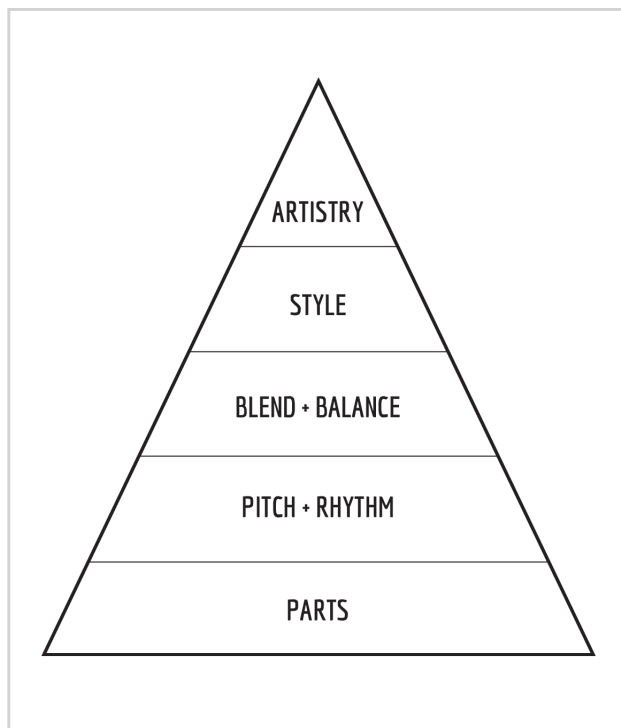
# DEVELOPING VOCAL MUSICIANSHIP

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Many of us in Groove for Thought are teachers, and we have a fairly large “bag of tricks” that are time-tested and effective. We’re happy to have the opportunity to share some of these with you.

Our philosophy is simple: we believe in the importance of setting high standards, developing strong fundamentals, and building discipline, competence and real, lasting confidence in students and ensembles.

As teachers and music makers, we have had countless discussions along these lines, as I’m sure many of you have as well. We are passionate about this pursuit and committed to it. As a result of these conversations, we’ve developed a hierarchy of priorities to assist in developing your ensemble.



At its core, each tier of this hierarchy requires a foundation that is solid and strong. Without that, everything above is built upon fundamental weakness.

If the parts are not being sung properly, for example, all other aspects of ensemble singing will be adversely affected. At a minimum, shaky part-singing strongly impacts the bottom three tiers of our hierarchy. If expressed in mathematical terms, this equals arguably 60-75% of what we must accomplish to have a really good group.

Shaky part-singing also impacts the upper 2 parts of the hierarchy in that if we do indeed have really good style and communication but are lacking solid fundamentals, isn't that really just like eating the “icing” of a cake? or perhaps it's like putting a \$40k roof on shack? Certainly this may seem like an oversimplification, but we've witnessed these results time and time again. So, great part-singing must remain one of our top priorities.

It's important to note that this hierarchy doesn't demand absolute perfection, as that's impossible, but rather proficiency. This foundation is a crucial component of musical success. Of course, parents and grandparents will think everything is wonderful, no matter what. This is a significant part of what we do as singers: we try to bring joy to our audiences. But we should always be pursuing musicianship on a deeper level as well. If we're taking the time to rehearse, we owe it to ourselves to dig as deeply as we can.

Our philosophy is that any group that faithfully executes the bottom three tiers of this hierarchy will be successful—at least to a large extent—no matter how much higher they climb. A group that sings the ink with good intonation, rhythm and feel will be presenting their audience with a pretty darned good sound. As other elements of expression and artistry are added, it only gets better from there. The group will sound good, they'll be consistent, and they'll be confident. It's a win/win/win scenario for everyone involved!

The idea here is not to set aside all other aspects of ensemble singing, but to renew our commitment to strong fundamentals. Too often these first few steps are not given enough focus, or they're abandoned too early in the process. Keeping your students focused on these objectives and embracing the discipline it requires of us is not only a worthwhile musical pursuit, but developing that drive or constant quest for quality can have a long-lasting and positive impact on kids.

The beauty is that you're not prohibited from working on other important aspects of musicianship while you're tirelessly working on fundamentals. Blend and balance, listening, phrasing, dynamics, overall artistry, musicality and style all require a rock solid foundation to shine.

It's okay to acknowledge when something is bad. Keep in mind that "bad" in this context is not negative, but a rallying point from which to work. This mindset can help your students develop more self-confidence and more self awareness, because establishing standards brings clarity, and then accomplishing something that is challenging not only serves to build ones confidence, but is also very rewarding.

Let's face it, this level of commitment is a lot of work! Building and strengthening fundamentals isn't always the most enjoyable pursuit for young music students. You may face some resistance if it's not already part of your culture. But with time, they'll understand that these are the expectations of your program, not lofty, unattainable goals. It takes patience, persistence, persuasion, group discovery and a method that is not simple drudgery. It requires creativity, resilience, a positive attitude, stubbornness and kindness, all with a little dose of "tough love" once in a while. It's worth every painstaking second of time you sink into it. Sounds like being a teacher.

We recognize that no two educators are the same; everyone will intertwine these musical pursuits in their own, unique ways. That's a great thing! The main thing to keep in mind as it relates to our topic is that while there's more than one path to scale a mountain, we all have to start at the bottom.

We suggest you use the hierarchy to help you identify your own ensemble philosophy. How much of your time do you spend on each tier? How much should you spend? How do they rank in importance to you and your ensemble? Should you consider reorganizing these priorities? These are all really healthy questions to be asking and discussing.

In summary, this is why we've come to see things this way, and why we're sharing it with you. It's what we collectively see and hear, all the time, all over the country. We find this philosophy to be fundamentally solid, and we know that it applies to all great music making regardless of genre or musical setting. It applies to everything.



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