

How do I know what part HE sings?

The changing male voice

Male singers experience a normal voice adjustment sometime during late elementary school, junior high, or sometimes in high school. The lowest part of their “young boy voice” drops, sometimes suddenly and sometimes slowly, until it settles into their adult male voice. This change takes time to get used to, and most male voices do not fully mature and “settle” until age 25. Males retain their upper voice, which is called “falsetto” because it sounds so different from their lower voice. In between their upper and lower voice, most males experience “voice cracks” or flips that happen spontaneously in singing and speech from time to time. Over time, both the upper and lower voice strengthen, and the voice does not “crack” as much.

Please tell your male singers that this is normal (even if aggravating to them at times). All males go through it, and their voice is richer because of it. In the mean time, though, the best thing they can do for their voice is to sing in the part of their voice that is working the best for them at the time. And be patient!

Most junior high male voices fall into three categories:

Unchanged/alto—He is still speaking and talking in a voice similar to (or just slightly lower than) his female colleagues. The alto part in most choral music is comfortable for him. Look out: some boys with unchanged voices may have a preconception about music that it is “girly” and they will try to sing very low or very quietly. It takes much more energy to sing higher than to sing lower; so a boy may sound like his voice is changing when he is simply talking and singing with very low energy in his unchanged voice.

In process/tenor—He is starting to experience “voice cracks” and his speaking voice is noticeably lower than his female colleagues but not as low as an adult male. The tenor part in most choral music is comfortable for him. He may have only a few notes he can sing right now. Encourage him that in time more notes will come, and to keep singing whatever he can sing. Some males will eventually become adult tenors in their late teens and twenties. This will sound stronger and clearer than it does now.

Changed/baritone—He speaks and sings in a low voice that sounds natural, although not as strong or loud as an adult male. His low voice is not forced, and he probably can still sing in his high voice when he’s goofing off and sound just as loud if not louder than his female colleagues (much to their chagrin). Some baritones change voice so quickly that they have a few notes in the middle of their range that simply do not come out for a few months. Encourage him that those notes will come back and to keep singing what he can.

Not all boys change gradually from alto to tenor to baritone. Some drop quickly from alto straight to baritone. Some voices change in 6th grade; some in 9th, while the majority will change in 7th or 8th grade. Everyone is different, not only in when the voice changes, but in how

it changes. It has nothing to do with height changes. A tall boy can still have an unchanged voice while a short boy can sing low bass. Do not base a boy's voice part on any physical characteristics you see.

Selecting a part to sing

When selecting a part to sing, be sensitive to the embarrassment factor. Don't ask boys to sing in front of girls by themselves, EVER. Meet with boys one on one or in groups of other boys when figuring out their singing parts. If you are a female teacher, be especially matter-of-fact about it and don't flinch if you hear a "crack." Remember, it's perfectly normal.*

First, ask the boy some questions and just listen to him talk for a little while. Does he sound like his female colleagues, or is his voice starting to "crack" at times and getting a little rough sounding? Or does he sound like an adult male, just a little quieter? This can give you an idea where to start.

Lastly, you can ask the student to sing a familiar song such as Amazing Grace or Jesus Loves Me in a couple different keys and see if a higher one or a lower one is comfortable. If you are unfamiliar with how to start a student in different keys you can have them sing for you a siren sound from what they feel like is their lowest note to their highest note and back down. This can help to determine whether their strength lies in a high range or a low one. As their voice slides from low to high listen both to how high they can sing and also to how strong their voice is in the high vs. the low register. Make sure they are really trying before you make your decision.

*One more thing:

make sure you do not allow female singers to giggle or laugh at male singers. Explain to the girls (without the guys around) the basics of what the guys are experiencing and make it clear that they must express their nervousness in another way. This is especially true at MusicFest.