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Singing in a choral ensemble can create a positive impact in the lives of its singers, helping them find community to develop into emotionally whole human beings. Finding ways to encourage the singers to view themselves as worthy, talented, and special is important. Their individual vocal development can foster this belief. Consistent support from the choral director, along with a strong understanding of healthy vocalism, can promote the singers’ positive view of their own voice. This provides an outlet for self-expression and encourages high self-esteem in the singers—no matter the age. To do this, choir directors must be aware of the challenges their singers face. Vocal technique—rooted in a scientific understanding of the voice and backed by historical pedagogy—is imperative in helping the singers navigate the musical complexities in a rehearsal setting. The building of strong voices in choir relies on the following seven key principles: the choral warm-up, posture, breathing and support, tone, choral blend, musical acuity, and the conductor’s model/gesture. This article focuses on the first three precepts: the choral warm-up, posture, and breathing and support. By refining the choral conductor’s knowledge of these seven essentials, and expanding their pedagogical toolboxes to use in rehearsals, each singer’s technique can blossom healthfully within a choral ensemble.

The Choral Warm-Up
The choral warm-up is one of the greatest tools we have to develop voices. Similar to an exercise warm-up, it is wise to begin with light exercises over a limited range, and then progress toward heavier singing loads with greater range. Titze suggests that it should “involve a dialogue with one’s body.” This allows the singers to gauge their instrument’s condition on that specific day and time. The singers’ use of kinesthetic movement can vastly help. Some ideas to engage the musicians include: conducting horizontally to engender breath flow; using the arms to visually depict the inhalation/exhalation process; palpating the larynx for a physical awareness of its position; or gently massaging the masseter muscles (chewing muscles) while vocalizing. Titze also states that warming up should be a “concert of individuality” where the singers are warming up their voices to their optimal individual sound. Expect to hear a cacophony of vocal sounds, especially when warming up more advanced singers. Work to further develop the students’ studio technique during the warm-up at a mezzo forte; the voice functions at maximum efficiency at this dynamic level. Do not insist upon choral blend yet, or the singers will begin holding back their voices from the start, diminishing their potential for greater vocal colors within the...
choral rehearsal. The unity of choral blend can occur when singing a piece together. This allows for each singer to bring their best vocalism to the repertoire.

Strong support exists to minimize collision of the vocal folds in the initial warm-up process. This protects the folds while stretching the muscles to prepare it for intense activity. Choir directors can accomplish this by keeping the mouth closed during much of the warm-up. Titze recommends semi-occluded vocal tract exercises such as lip trills, tongue trills, humming, and phonation through a straw. For example: a lip trill on a simple scale (scale degrees 1, 2, 3, 2, 1) gently engages the folds at the rehearsal’s onset. The simplicity of the scale and limited range allows for the voice to “wake up” before more demanding vocalizations.

Ensure a high-quality breath and pitch clarity in these semi-occluded vocal tract exercises; this serves to establish foundational elements before tackling other aspects of choral technique: choral blend, articulating in synchrony, matching vowels, etc. An ending warm-up can consist of a legato /a/ vowel while singing scale degrees 1, 3, 5, 8, 5, 3, 1 in the singers’ fullest, most resonant voice. The forte dynamic and the arpeggiation that spans an octave is a heavier singing load that can strengthen their ability to project with energy while combining the technical concepts solidified early on in the warm-up.

Depending on the age of the singers, the warm-up process can look very different. According to Freer, a successful choral warm-up for adolescents will have four components:

1) a logical sequence that remains constant from day-to-day;
2) student choice and experimentation with the warm-ups (i.e. “pick either Do, Mi, Sol, or high Do and sustain it on an /o/ vowel”);
3) a pedagogical relationship between the warm-up and the repertoire to be rehearsed; and
4) a variety of activities.

The pedagogical relationship between the warm-up and repertoire helps to transfer the vocal technique developed into the literature. Students can then identify these items in the rehearsal, reinforcing their self-efficacy in rehearsals. The variety of activities provides a gentle transition from the busy outside world to the rehearsal setting.

The opening moments of rehearsal provide an opportunity for “group voice building” or “group vocal technique.” This philosophy guides the enhancement of the choristers’ vocal skills. Because adolescent singers have different vocal ranges, developing non-pitched vocalization exercises draws the students into the choral experience by helping them achieve success at the rehearsal’s onset. Examples of these include: laughing or crying in a general vocal range, high-pitched squeals, and low-pitched growls. Listen for unanimity of the students’ different parts of their ranges. These can morph into more specific consonant and vowel sounds like /baba/ or /dodo/ to refine vowels, consonants, and technique. Within this “group voice building,” singers evolve their technical “toolbox” so that when encountered with a difficult vocal passage in the literature, they have the means to navigate it.
successfułly.

Besides the studio teacher, there are few people who develop voices more than choral directors. Those who successfully develop the voices in their care begin rehearsal with warm-ups, understand the voice and its capabilities, and constantly address vocal technique in the rehearsal.

Alignment

Strong vocal technique is founded on excellent physical alignment, and many choir directors begin the warm-up process by addressing this in some way. Physical motions—like stretching, tossing a football, shoveling snow, or raking leaves—help transition the singers from the boisterous outside world to the calm focus needed for rehearsal. From these movements, finding the most favorable alignment of the skeletal structure for singing is key. Because individual students vary in posture, the term “alignment” is preferred over “posture.” Using the term “posture” often causes singers to alter their body position through muscularity (puffing out their chest or excessively pulling their shoulders back). The term “alignment” invokes a calmer positioning of the body’s bones, resulting in less muscular tension. Each singer’s organic alignment should reduce the body’s extraneous muscle tension to prepare the body for success. Watch for an elevation of the sternum with shoulders placed back and relaxed; because of cell phones, rounded shoulders are the most common ailment afflicting our students nowadays. The Alexander technique has proven useful for vocalists and is recommended for further consideration.

Ann Howard Jones talks to choral singers about the body’s energy, stating that “singing does not come out of a static body.” The singers should stand as if they are about to traverse a tightrope; this pulls the torso up and lengthens it to give the body the feeling of suspension. This active body engagement should be paired with an engagement of the mind. If accomplished, there will be a positive connection between the body and the singer’s tone production.

Though the goal in our alignment is to be as relaxed as possible, singing is athletic: it requires the action of some muscles and the release of others. Muscles in the neck, mouth, shoulder, and head should be released. During inhalation, the diaphragm will be active, and expansion in the area below the rib cage will be inevitable. During exhalation, however, each singer will feel different sensations, and each voice teacher will explain the sensations differently. Because of this, it is recommended that choir directors emphasize the release of muscles that interfere (i.e., the jaw, throat, neck, shoulders, face) and let the studio teacher emphasize the muscular sensations after that. This release of tension can be accomplished through physical activity (stretching, moving, swinging arms) and kinesthetic reminders (e.g., “Touch your index finger to your masseter muscle, and let it melt the tension.”).

Breathing and Support

A fundamental part of developing voices in a choral ensemble involves the pedagogy of breathing and support. Gebhardt states that teaching proper breathing technique is “achievable for all kids, especially after the age of eight when their lungs are more fully developed.” The breath control training improves vocal ranges, sound intensity, tonal duration, and pitch accuracy regardless of age.

Inhalation should be silent, the muscles of the abdomen should be released, and the singer should maintain expanded ribs and a contracted diaphragm for a controlled exhalation. Without these elements, the singer would not be able to sing in tune since pitch accuracy correlates directly with breath support. Cottrell expounds on these ideas, and cites modern scientific studies and historical literature to confirm three useful principles that define our breathing pedagogy. The first principle is that full use of the chest and abdomen is necessary for good breathing. An abdominal approach—with a sole focus on the diaphragm—was a staple of choral pedagogy for most of the twentieth century. Still popular among choral conductors, this breathing method ignores the contribution of the chest to a well-supported tone. The science of anatomy and historical pedagogy backs this assertion: the surface area of the lungs attached to the ribcage is greater than that attached to the diaphragm. Therefore, using the ribcage to aid in inspiration processes a greater volume of air. For optimal inspiration, elite classical singers follow
this breathing method: contraction of the diaphragm, relaxation of the abdomen, followed by an expansion of the chest cavity caused by external intercostals. This combination is the most effective way to increase total lung capacity. Panting (like an overheated dog) is a practical tool to draw attention to these muscle areas in the breathing process.

The second principle that Cottrell sets forth is that opposing muscular forces must be balanced during controlled expiration. During expiration, the muscles of inhalation (diaphragm and external intercostals) remain slightly contracted to provide resistance to expiratory forces from the internal intercostals and abdominals. This resistance keeps the exhalation muscles from contracting too quickly and prevents air from being forced out rapidly. During expiration, the abdominal muscles exert pressure over the lower portion of the lungs, and the internal intercostals exert pressure on the upper portion of the lungs. As a result, maximum expiratory force is achieved. This balanced breathing method offers singers more control over airflow and subglottal pressure, leading to more consistent breath support.

Cottrell’s final principle specifies that good breath support is dependent upon firm glottal closure. Two laryngeal muscles are responsible for this: the interarytenoids (IAs) and lateral cricoarytenoids (LCAs). Both sets of muscles must be contracted for complete glottal closure. Engaging only the LCA results in a glottal gap, causing breathiness and a weak, unsupported tone. Garcia advocated the coup de la glotte as a way to build firm phonation in his singers. This onset is not harmful, if properly trained, and can easily be translated into the singing tone. To feel this, speak the American phrase “uh oh.” Though Cottrell posits that the coup de la glotte is not recommended in choral performances, teaching it during the warm-up will translate into firmer, clearer vocal sounds.

Sustained tone exercises (such as singing on an /a/ vowel on any single pitch) serve an important role in teaching support. It allows each singer to concentrate on breath management, making corrections as needed; it builds continuous coordination of breath and resistance in the folds; and it leads to the ability to sustain legato phrases, producing a more connected tone. It is also important to note that because singers take in a breath to sing an entire phrase, the conductor should aim to rehearse in phrases—and not little spurts. This trains the singers’ bodies to take in, and release, breath efficiently for each phrase.

Conclusion

Singers’ vocal development in a choral ensemble starts with the director’s clear understanding of technique, rooted in a scientific understanding of the mechanism, and supported by historical pedagogy. These seven essentials form a foundation for the singers’ vocal growth: the choral warm-up, posture, breathing and support, tone, choral blend, musical acuity, and the conductor’s model/gesture. This initial installment of a two-part article refines understanding of the first three precepts: the choral warm-up, posture, and breathing and support. Once these three are understood and applied, tone, choral blend, musical acuity, and one’s own model
and conducting gesture can form an ideal environment for each singer's voice to burgeon healthily.

NOTES


2 Ibid., 36.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.


6 Freer, 60.


12 Ibid., 54.

13 Ibid., 53.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., 57.

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**Practical Teaching Ideas for Today’s Music Educator**

*ChorTeach* is ACDA’s quarterly online magazine for choral directors/music educators who are searching for fresh ideas or techniques to meet practical needs in their choral classroom. Articles are chosen from author submissions and from ACDA state and regional newsletters and reprinted with permission. *ChorTeach* is edited by Terry Barham and contains over 150 articles dating back to 2008. The *ChorTeach* index is organized by genre and annotated for easy reference. View the archives and index at acda.org/chorteach. Below is a preview of the Spring 2021 issue of *ChorTeach*.

**Sharing through Song: Resources for Singing Migration Stories** by Ethan M. Chessin

For those who wonder how to use song to tell someone else’s story, the author of this article provides “resources for teachers and directors interested in using music to teach choirs and audiences about immigration.” The Immigrant Story (www.theimmigrantstory.org) was a primary source for his project.

**Addressing Racial and Cultural Challenges in Choirs** by Baruch Whitehead

Should white students sing stories about Black oppression? This article details a collaboration between a predominantly white high school choir and a multiracial, intergenerational choir of college and community singers.

**A Delicate Balance—Caring for the Music and the Singers** by J. Dennis Morrissey

This is an interview article with twelve college/university choral conductors from Illinois answering questions about caring for the music and the singers, rehearsal balance, and more.

**Preserving the Choral Art in the Time of COVID: “How Can I Keep From Singing?”** by David Howard and Jeffrey J. Gonda II

The authors of this article share their experience with the challenges and triumphs of making music during the COVID pandemic with the hope of inspiring and encouraging others.