

Developing musicianship skills with your choir

All choirs learn and assimilate their choral musicianship training during rehearsal, and this begins with the warm-up. A successful warm-up will not only renew basic vocal skills and prepare your singers for using their voices but will also focus the group and outline your artistic intent for that session, and could include exercises to skills in ensemble, rhythm, pulse, intonation and articulation.

Unlike the warm-up of an athlete, the singers' warm-up is not aimed at creating warmth within the body to help make muscles supple before strenuous sport. The singers' warm-up is mainly about sending clear messages to the brain to remind the brain how to behave when singing. It is a form of 'remembering' exercise, tapping into the skills that we already have, as much as introducing new ones.

The warm-up is also a very important opportunity for training your singers to watch you and to learn and respond to your gestures. Make the most of this time whilst the singers are not holding any scores or lyric sheets and are not otherwise distracted.

Choral Skills can be addressed at most points throughout a warm-up, covering ensemble, rhythm & pulse, intonation and articulation, along with other musicianship skills. Amongst the skills you cover, you should aim to include anything you know will be relevant in the music to follow, and always make sure you get exactly what you want from your singers – bad habits are almost impossible to break!

- **Clap with me** – see if the singers can clap at the same moment as you. This is a good way to test your singers' responses, and also for you to modify the way you move your hands towards the beat (tactus) giving you an opportunity to find the clearest versions.
- **Pass the bob** – pass a sound/word around a circle, trying to maintain a strict pulse. Then test everyone's listening skills by doing it with eyes closed, starting at differing speeds, and in different directions around the circle.
- **Breathing Rhythms** – during the breathing section of your warm-up you could try teaching different rhythms, particularly any tricky ones that feature in the music you're going to be singing later. Getting the rhythms into the body like this is far more effective than just clapping them.
- **Tongue Twisters** – these are excellent for finding flexibility around the tongue and mouth. Singing tongue twisters up and down a five-note scale is a great way to develop flexibility, and there are also books of tongue twisters designed to aid specific vowel/consonant difficulties.

- **Call and Response** – Call and response songs are a great tool for introducing conducting gestures. Simultaneously (and consistently) use your conducting gestures whilst you are singing, and whilst your group responds. You can also use these songs to promote leadership skills amongst the singers, by inviting individuals to lead the song.
- **Scales and arpeggios** - During warm-ups, exercises that include scales and arpeggios are an important tool for learning intonation, including the introduction of unusual scales (such as modes, jazz scales, etc.), especially if they'll feature later in your session.
- **Harmonic progressions** – There are a variety of exercises for training intonation that involve singing chords. Singing harmonic progressions can also be used to build blend and to encourage singers to take responsibility for the balance of sound in a chord.
- **Rounds** – Rounds are useful for promoting confidence in part singing. Typical rounds are in 3 or 4 parts, but many will divide into upwards of 16 parts, leading to increased confidence in the singers.
- **Inner Ear Training** – Inner ear training aims to train the singer to perceive a tuned note at times when they aren't singing. Take a simple song, melody or scale, and miss out key words or notes as you sing it, leaving a rest where the notes should have been. Using a round for this exercise will also help singers to use their inner ear effectively during multi-part singing. As well as being a useful tool for teaching sight-reading, singing by numbers (or using Kodály Hand-signs) should also re-enforce the use of the inner ear when singing choral music.

The best warm-ups are those that have been devised specifically to suit the rehearsal, the singers and the music. This will not only focus the singers on the tasks ahead, but also save time in your rehearsal. For instance, if you are going to be rehearsing a piece with lots of semi-tone steps then you might consider using a chromatic exercise in your warm-up. You could use the warm-up to introduce complicated cross-rhythms, or to prepare for singing long phrases in one breath.

If you are working with young people you should make sure that the content in your warm-up is both suitable and entertaining and, ideally, different from one rehearsal to the next.

Experiment with developing your own exercises, and your own style of delivery, and write them down as you prepare them from week to week. Through your own practice and regular self - evaluation you will find what works best to achieve the results you want from your choir.