

JUMP-STARTING Your Daily Rehearsals

by Rebecca Raber, R & S Chair for Male Choirs

"Success is neither magical nor mysterious. Success is the natural consequence of consistently applying the basic fundamentals."

~ Jim Rohn



Another school year has begun and teachers and students alike have met the upcoming year with mixed emotion. A colleague of mine used to say, "For teachers, August is like an entire month of Sunday nights at 9 o'clock." We are music educators because we love what we do. And as we ease back into our rehearsals schedules this fall, it is important for us to remember the fundamentals of beautiful, healthy and efficient singing. Consider placing a bit more emphasis on your warm-up sequence for your choral rehearsals. I regard my choral warm-up time as not only an integral but absolutely *vital* portion of my routine and am amazed at how much it influences the rest of my rehearsal. I am fortunate enough to meet with my choirs for 47 minutes, five days each week. However, if your class time is more limited, I submit it is just as important, and perhaps, more important to your students to reinforce those fundamentals through daily warm-ups. If you find time to do these things, or at least some of these things, it can make your rehearsal time spent on literature much more efficient and meaningful. You'll also notice that many of these ideas are *just* that...ideas to try and help create an atmosphere in your room and develop capable singers on your risers.

1. PLAN IT INTO YOUR DAILY REHEARSAL

- ♪ You must incorporate this time into your rehearsal schedule, even if you have limited rehearsal time. Every day!
- ♪ This is the important and sometimes only time when the students' *individual* improvement takes priority over the ensemble. It's a double blessing however, because as individuals improve their technique, the ensemble improves by default also!

2. GATHERING FOR A COMMON PURPOSE

- ♪ Make it a time of gathering for the students. All important events have this sense of "gathering."
- ♪ Help them to arrive from all their other classes and from all other grade levels to be "one in purpose."
- ♪ Create an atmosphere that students thirst for. Select a cd to play as students come into your room (a different mood each day). I also do things such as opening the outside door to let sunshine and fresh air in or spraying a subtle scent in the room. The point is, make your classroom different. Help them want to come to your room...make it a refuge.
- ♪ Encourage them to leave all of their "baggage" at the door (stress, failed test, etc) and gather to *create art* on a daily basis.

3. GETTING THE WHOLE BODY READY

- ♪ Always start with physical warm-ups. Singing is an *athletic activity* after all. There may be students new to singing or inhibited in their movement. Gain their trust by explaining how each movement connects to their singing. Some examples include: rotating shoulders, head rolls, massage neck and jaw, stretching, balance exercises, etc. Don't forget to do backrubs...in what other class do you get a backrub every day...plus this promotes great camaraderie.
- ♪ I usually continue with a breathing exercise: inhaling (through nose) and exhaling for a prescribed number of beats, sometimes changing to hissing or pulsing the exhalation...but always stressing the inhalation be silent and fill the bottom first.
- ♪ Allow students to lead after you've given them several days of examples. As you know student ownership is great for any choir.
- ♪ Use this time to try some rhythmic exercises such as echoing your pattern (clap, snap, stomp, etc). Then try echo 4 or 8 beats later so they have to *execute while thinking ahead*...what better skill do we want them to develop?
- ♪ Compose short 1-measure rhythms on your board. Assign one per section and have them clap the rhythm, adding, subtracting and even trading parts on the go. Students really enjoy these exercises, but don't do this one every day so it stays fresh.

4. PREPARING & TRAINING THE VOICE

- ♪ Warm them up as if teaching a group voice lesson. I teach my ensembles and individual lesson students using the same concept: BREATH - SPACE (vertical) - FOCUS (forward)
- ♪ Some vocal warm-ups also help to work on breath and breath support. Try sigh glides, lip flips and silly sounds, especially incorporated with kinesthetic reinforcement. Almost all students enjoy a little silliness in their day. Again, be encouraged to make your class "different" than everything else they do all day.
- ♪ Proceed with vocalises that focus the voice forward. This is not to be confused with "brightness," just forward in the "masque." I often use humming, descending and/or stepwise patterns using the closed vowels "ee" and "oo" plus consonants such as m, n, d, t, b, p, f, v, s, z, etc.
- ♪ Following the "resonance" warm-ups, I use exercises which include other vowels (and alternating vowel patterns) as well as patterns which include both stepwise and skip-note motion.
- ♪ Remember, while we want sounds to be energized, the more important goal is to make relaxing sounds as they begin to sing for the day. Realize that they've probably been using their voices incorrectly all day...this warm-up time should make them say, "ah, this is different, this is easy...*this feels good!*"

5. PREPARING THE MIND / DEVELOPING “CHORAL INSTINCTS”

- ♪ Finally, I end my vocal warm-ups with an activity that prepares their minds for what I want to accomplish in rehearsal as well as honing their “choral instincts.” What skills do you want them to exhibit during the rehearsal?
energy – tuning – rhythm – clarity – tone – diction – sight-reading – aural learning – balance – blend
- ♪ Rehearse chordal singing (build a chord, work on vowels and balance in relationship to tuning).
- ♪ Practice intervals and patterns. Rehearse a difficult interval or rhythm from your literature.
- ♪ Sing a chorale tune or a 4 part hymn.
- ♪ Mix in a theory mini-lesson, don't be afraid to switch it up.
- ♪ Put “Sight Singing du jour” on your daily menu...it doesn't have to be long, just consistent to develop reading confidence.
- ♪ Use warm-up time to use these short exercises to *teach them how to execute correctly when the time comes in rehearsal.*
- ♪ Reinforce, reinforce, reinforce... during rehearsals, refer back to concepts mastered during warm-ups.

I know that it appears that I spend all my time on warm-ups. Let me assure you I don't. In actuality, I spend between 5-7 minutes each day on them, sometimes more and sometimes less. I am convinced that we are able to master our repertoire each year only because we devote a daily portion of our rehearsal to fundamentals. It makes your entire rehearsal process more productive throughout the year. It is a time for you to add variety into your daily routine and allow the students some time to grow as individuals. Be creative. Build yourself a library of vocalises, activities and skills that you can share with your students.

I wish you a marvelous year full of joyful singers and inspired music-making!

Respectfully,
Rebecca Raber

Publications with great warm-ups for singers and choirs:

- ♪ *Building Beautiful Voices (Paul Nesheim)*
- ♪ *The Choral Warm-Up Collection (Compiled and Edited by Sally Albrecht)*
- ♪ *The Complete Choral Warm-Up Book (Robinson/Althouse)*

