

A Guide to the Principles of Choral Conducting

All conductors learn and assimilate their training over many years of experiencing trial and error in rehearsal. This guide aims to cover all the basic skills you'll need to begin developing your own unique conducting style.

What is conducting?

Conducting is more than just keeping the beat; it is an expression of music that uses the whole body.

We affect our singers in many different ways as conductors or music leaders, from giving our singers musical signals (such as dynamics, or how many beats in the bar) to other non-verbal gestures such as breathing and emotional expression. All of these affects are achieved through a mirroring of our own movements and body language as a conductor.

- When we breathe, our singers breathe with us.
- When we smile, they smile back.
- When we stand well, so do our singers.

Before we can really understand the affects, we have to understand the basic principles involved in singing, and that begins with a good old-fashioned warm-up.

Warming-up for Healthy Singing

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. Also, and perhaps even more importantly to the conductor, it is often the only time in a rehearsal when your singers are not distracted by potential barriers such as scores or word-sheets. This is when your singers learn to follow your body gestures, and an effective warm-up can help define a conducting style.

A warm-up should ideally include at least one element of each of the following, and ideally in this order:

- Posture
- Brain Gym
- Breathing & Support
- Opening the range
- Resonance
- Vowels
- Choral Skills (ensemble, rhythm & pulse, intonation, articulation)

Relative to many choral cultures around the world, UK choirs don't usually have much time for rehearsing. Fortunately many common warm-up exercises will combine these warm-up elements to save time. Firstly, it's important to understand the individual elements and their purpose.

Posture is the first thing to prepare, as this will affect both breathing and sound. The aim is to free tension from the body (in particular the neck, jaw, shoulders and arms) and then to find a posture which allows for expansive breathing across the chest and lower parts of the ribs, and clear airways for breathing freely.

***Exercise:** Try standing with your feet placed approximately the same distance apart as your shoulders. Then reach up with your arms (you should feel your ribcage also rise up) and then let your arms back down to your sides but leaving your ribcage raised (this will help make space for your breathing apparatus, and also straighten your spine to give you stronger support). Then massage the back of your neck upward towards your head, and then also your shoulders – or better still, have someone else do it! (This will help keep your spine aligned right up to your head, which means your airways should be clear). Feel tall, powerful and grounded, like a Royal Oak tree!*

Brain Gym is (in very simplified terms) a common technique used in schools to keep pupils alert in class, and to help increase their awareness of people and things around them. The concept of Brain Gym is based on the premise that one side of our brain is responsible for "thinking" (creative) and the other side is responsible for "doing" (practical) and that through cross-lateral exercises we can improve the co-ordination between these two separate areas of brain activity, and therefore increase our effectiveness in all that we do. For very simple singing tasks this will increase the speed of learning, but the benefits are most evident in more complicated tasks (such as sight-reading, or songs that involve complicated words/rhythm patterns)

***Exercise:** Try patting your head and rubbing your tummy at the same time, then swap hands so that you're patting your head with the other hand. Then try swapping the actions, so that you are painting circles above your head whilst patting your tummy, and swapping hands again. Try speeding it up too! (You can also try this exercise whilst singing a song at the same time, or whilst doing other parts of your warm-up!)*

Breathing for singing is often described with confusing metaphor and analogies, but the basic science is actually quite straightforward to understand. There are three types of breathing:

- Ceiling breathing
- Wall breathing
- Floor breathing

Ceiling breathing is when we use the small pockets of our lungs that reach right up into our shoulders – in singing we tend not to use this area too much, as it can put the spine out of alignment if it is filled with air.

Wall breathing is when we use our side and back muscles to expand air into the walls of our ribcage – these are the main muscles involved in "support".

Floor breathing is when we operate the diaphragm (a dome shaped piece of tough material located at the bottom of the lungs). It is not a muscle, and has no nerve endings, so we can't actually feel it – we only know it's there because of the parts of the body around it which move. Attached underneath the dome of the diaphragm is a Central Tendon, which pulls downwards to fill us up with air (this is why you'll often hear singing leaders talk about breathing into your boots). To push the air back out we use the muscles underneath our bowels (which literally push everything back up) and, most importantly our pelvic floor muscles (you can usually feel these contracting if you simply bend your knees to sing when standing, or sit up tall to sing when sitting).

***Exercise:** Try panting very small amounts of air in and out – you should notice your shoulders and chests rising up and down (ceiling breathing). Then take a deep breath with your hands on your sides (just above your hips at the bottom of your ribcage) and blow hard making a “Shh” sound – now you should feel your side and back muscles working (wall breathing). Then put your hand on your tummy and make a series of very short “shh” or “fft” sounds – now you should feel a kick from your lower abdominal muscles (floor breathing).*

“Support” describes how we control the release of air during singing. If we were to just push the air out, it would cause tension on the vocal folds (or chords) and the end result is shouting rather than singing. Instead we control the release of air by using both pushing and pulling muscles simultaneously. The floor muscles push the air up and out whilst, at the same time, the wall muscles work in an outwards direction to try and hold the air in. It is working on this balance between these two muscle areas that forms the basis for healthy singing, and all singers will be disadvantaged until they can achieve a degree of support.

***Exercise:** The most famous exercise for encouraging support is the long hiss. Try taking a slow breath, filling up gradually, from the bottom of your lungs, over 3 or 4 seconds, and then control a long and consistent hiss for about 10 seconds. Make sure that your shoulders, neck and throat are relaxed, and you should find that you can feel the floor and wall muscles working. Then try hissing for longer periods (12, 16, 20, 24 seconds) to develop control over the flow of air. Lastly, try hissing with your hands on your sides (as before) and see if you can maintain an outward force from your wall muscles whilst the air is being released. Remember to make sure your posture stays tall and grounded throughout, to avoid collapsing your ribcage as you run out of air.*

Opening the vocal range can be achieved with many exercises, and there are numerous methods for getting there, but the first voiced sounds in your warm-up should always descend from the top of the vocal range. This is because the vocal folds (or chords) are prone to being over-stretched, and once stretched can take some time to relax fully again.

The vocal folds are not so much like strings (as the term vocal chords might suggest) but instead it is just an elongated slit that opens into the top of your windpipe – If you imagine a balloon full of air, being pinched at the top by a pair of fingers on either side, then this is not far off. The vocal folds are operated by two muscles (front and back) which pull at either end of the slit to change the sound/pitch (if you were to pull in both directions across the top of a balloon you might get it to squeak as the air is released, the pitch of the squeak will change as you change the tension, and as the air pressure decreases inside the balloon). Muscles are designed to contract and relax, but they will always find it easiest to contract, which is what is happening as the singing voices rises in pitch. Therefore, to make sure that these muscles are not over stretched, and to

give them plenty of practice at relaxing back down to lower pitches, always start your vocal warm-up with descending sounds, instead of rising scales.

As you begin to vocalise, it is also important to start shaping your mouth (in preparation for covering vowels). The ideal position is to raise your soft palette – this is a soft and flexible area of the roof of your mouth, towards the back (the front section is called the hard palette) you can feel it lift when you yawn, as the coldness of the air brushes past.

***Exercise:** Try making a high “Ooo” sound, descending like a firework. Then try using consonants to launch the sound into the air, such as “EeyOoo” or “NgOoo”. Also, try to focus the sound towards the back and roof of your mouth, into your raised soft palette, rather than forwards into the room (this will help to stop the sound being pushed or shouted, and will also be important in creating resonance). Now you can try spanning the full range of the voice using ‘sirening’ – Make an “Ng” sound (as at the end of the word “sing”) and slide your pitch right to the top of your range and back to the bottom. If you find gear changes in your voice as you go (not typically a problem in adolescent unchanged voices) then try gently pushing outwards with your wall breathing muscles to smooth over the gear changes. Already we have begun to combine the breathing muscles with the singing voice.*

Resonance is the vibration of sound that we use to amplify our voice. If our voice were a HiFi-speaker, then our body is the speaker box which allows the sound to vibrate and maximise itself. Just like the speaker, the sound created initially by our vocal folds is really very tiny, and we need to use all available cavities within our body to amplify that sound. The largest cavity is the lungs, followed by the mouth and nose, and then there are hundreds of tiny spaces where the tissues of the body are also able to resonate (head, neck, cheek bones, almost everywhere).

The construction of a HiFi-speaker box will also affect the sound it gives out, depending on the capacity, and the type of materials used to make it. Similarly, the choice of which areas of our body we resonate, and how we allow vibrations of sound to travel around the body, will affect the characteristics of our singing sound. For instance, if we tense muscles in our neck, we make the muscle tissue denser, and vibrations of sound can't then pass so easily from the chest area to the head. This is why we need to stay relaxed when we sing!

***Exercise:** Place your hand on your chest and make a vibrant “Vvv” sound with your lips, and see if you can feel the vibrations. Try modifying the muscles around your abdomen, or contorting your body to see how it changes the strength of the buzz. Now try and find the best position to achieve the strongest vibrations. Then try moving your hand to feel the vibrations on other parts of your body, such as the back of your neck, nose, cheek bones and top of the head. See how the buzz changes in each of these places if you alter the pitch – lower pitches resonate best in the larger cavities and higher pitches will often resonate strongest in the head. See if you can get an almost equal resonance across your pitch range.*

Vowels are usually referred to as a set of 5, and the set will usually sound different depending on where you come from, or what language you speak. In singing our 5 vowels are: A (Ah), E (Eh), I (i), O (ó) and U (oo). They are each created by 5 separate positions of the mouth and tongue. When the tongue and/or mouth change position, the vibrations of sound (resonance) are re-directed into different regions of the mouth – a bit like changing the angle of the air vents in a car to redirect heated air to different areas.

If you are relaxed around your tongue, neck and face you should be able to feel your 5 vowels vibrating. To maximise the sound of the singing voice, and to give the vowels the best clarity, try to focus the sound vibrations of each vowel towards those parts of the body/head where they are naturally weakest:

- “Ah” is usually best angled at the back of the neck and head
- “Eh” is best just under the ears, where the jaws meet
- “I” (as in hit, not “ee”) is best going straight up through the top of the head
- “O” (as in hot – right in between “oar” and “ah”) is right between the eyes, at the top of the nose
- “U” is the purest and also the weakest vowel. It is focussed towards the front of the face

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.
- Abeo (Voiceworks) – 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.
- Scales and arpeggios - During warm-ups scales and arpeggios are an important tool for learning intonation. There are a number of reasons why intonation can go sharp or flat. Typically, flat singing is through lacking support and insufficient lifting of the soft palette, and sharp singing is often due to too much tension in the support muscles, or around the throat. During the warm-up can be a good time to introduce unusual scales (such as modes, jazz scales, etc.), especially if they’ll feature later in your session.

The Art of Conducting

As I mentioned at the start – “Conducting is more than just keeping the beat, it is an expression of music that uses the whole body”. We all have different body proportions, shapes and sizes, heights and lengths. It’s really important then, as conductors, that we find conducting gestures which fit our own body, and our own body language. This also means that the way in which we express music will also be individual to us.

Exercise: *To find your own starting-point for discovering your body’s way of expressing music, try taking an easy song and allowing yourself to move freely as you sing it – these movements are what your body is trying to say about this music. Now try replicating this in front of a mirror to see what you did. Now imagine trying the same exercise in front of a choir, and we’re half way to being a conductor.*

To enable the conductor to communicate their natural musical emotions effectively to a choir, it is important to learn a few basic elements of the craft.

- Giving a clear beat is of course important, and a consistent pattern is desirable (although not always essential for leading choirs – to the upset of many orchestral players!) The typical pattern of four-in-a-bar, using just your right hand, is Down, Left, Right and Up. Three-in-a-bar is Down, Right and Up. Two-in-a-bar is Down and Up.

Exercise: *Practice this pattern of four-in-a-bar for a few minutes with just one hand, maintaining a steady speed, until it feels comfortable. Try to place each beat on the same imaginary point (known sometimes as the ‘tactus’) located at your core/centre (ie. roughly around your belly-button). Watch yourself in a mirror to help you find this point (it will always appear much lower than it really is until you see yourself in the mirror)*

- To help support your choirs breathing you may find it more effective to keep the height and depth of your conducting pattern to a minimum. This will also help your singers keep track of your beat, and keep the focus on your middle (where the all important breathing can be seen to happen)

Exercise: *Try to keep your conducting pattern inside a smallish imaginary box. You may want to vary the size of this box depending on the size of your choir, the keenness of their eyesight, or if it is going to positively affect the sound you want for that song. You will usually find that bigger gestures make it harder to achieve good ensemble (togetherness)*

- To maintain a sense of flow (which is really important to the breathing of your singers) it’s important to keep the four points of your beat well connected, and free of any jerky movements.

Exercise: *Try conducting with just your elbows, and then extend your arm to use your fingertips (as though your forearm and fingers were like a paintbrush and bristles attached to your elbow). See if you can paint a very small picture on a wall that is about 10metres away!*

- Think about your posture and, as I mentioned at the start, how you should mirror that which you want your singers to do. Sometimes, particularly in lively music, it is very tempting to move around a lot. This can disrupt the posture of your singers, and can also dilute the clarity of your beat.

Exercise: Practice your pattern of four-in-a-bar again in the mirror, observing how much your body is affected by the movement of your arm(s). Make sure that you are maintaining the singers posture (as described in the warm-up section above)

- When you want your singers to breath, you should also take a breath. If you have engaged with your singers, and have their attention, then your singers will breathe when you do. It's also important to give similar attention to how the breath stops at the end of a phrase of music – one piece might demand a dead stop, whilst another might be better if you let the sound disperse gently.

Exercise: Try influencing your singers by breathing well ahead of an entry, ideally in time with the pulse of the music (as though you are jumping onto a train that is already moving). This will help prepare the body to sing, without any sudden jarring movements caused by last-minute deep breathing, and will also get the body instantly integrated with the pulse. Make sure that you eye-ball all of your singers, otherwise you may find they are not eye-balling you back, and they may not respond to these suggestive gestures. Similarly, try a few different ways of ending phrases to see what works best for that piece of music. See how you can stop the flow of air in different ways to achieve different effects/sounds/results, and try different gestures to achieve these from your singers.

- Generally it is the strength of your movement that controls dynamics (loud and soft) much better than their size. Similarly, longer, smoother movements are best for legato (smooth) singing, and short abrupt movements for staccato (very short notes)

Exercise: Try using big movements for louder dynamics, then compare that with movements which are smaller but stronger. Then try different types of movement for staccato and legato phrasing. Choppy/sharp movements for staccato usually work well, but try varying the strength to find the difference between short notes and accented ones. For a smooth legato imagine you're gently buttering some toast with an axe, but making sure there are no jerky changes of direction in your pattern.

- The strongest expressions of musical emotion come from your face and, in particular, eyes. If you are truly engaged with the emotions in the music, then this will come across. Sometimes a little acting is necessary, as the sound of the music will always reflect what your eyes are saying, and singers will usually "sing what they see". If you are visibly anxious then the singers will sound anxious. If you are full of joy and excitement then the sound you will get will be joyful and exciting!

Exercise: Try now repeating the starting-point exercise at the top of this section. Take an easy song and allow yourself to move freely as you sing it. Then replicate these movements in front of a mirror to see what you did. Think about how your face and, most importantly your eyes, tell the story of the music, as well as your body.

Final Thoughts:

It's important to make a plan for any group singing session, regardless of age or ability of the group, and this is a great time to consider the gestures you might need to use. Practice them in front of a mirror, and see if you think they will achieve what you want. Then, when you try them out on your singers, make sure you really listen to the results. If you don't get what you want from your choir, try something else until you do. Always analyse the effectiveness of your gestures by what you hear, and be ready to adapt and modify your gestures – this is where music making can become very spontaneous and exciting!

Try to also work these gestures into your warm-up. Enjoy experimenting and learning about your own body language – you can help yourself progress even faster if you keep an action-learning journal of your experiences, or video some of your rehearsals to analyse later.

You are now equipped with everything you need to begin developing your own conducting gestures and style. They say, "Practice makes perfect" and it's true that experience is everything when it comes to conducting. The best advice I can offer is to get out there, find a group of singers who you can meet with regularly and, to quote a well known sports brand, "Just do it!"