

Warming-Up: Preparing the BodyMindVoice and 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, it will also focus the group and outline your artistic intent for that session.

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.

Warm-ups can include exercises to cover each of the following:

- Energising & Stretching & Relaxing
- Brain Gym
- Posture
- Soft Palette Raising
- Breathing & Support
- Opening the range
- Resonance
- Vowels
- Choral Skills (ensemble, rhythm & pulse, intonation, articulation)

Energising & Stretching & Relaxing For healthy singing and focused rehearsal the singer needs to be relaxed, yet also energised and alert. By increasing the oxygen intake to the brain and body, and improving circulation generally, singers will find they are more alert and relaxed. This is a great way to begin a warm-up because, in addition to the benefits to the rehearsal, the rest of the warm-up will then also be more effective.

Exercise: The Shake Down. *This exercise follows a pattern of shaking parts of the body a specific number of times, in order, getting progressively faster and exciting as the pattern repeats. Begin by shaking your right arm 8 times (counting out loud the numbers 1-8 as you go), then shake your left arm 8 times, then right foot 8 times and then left foot 8 times (counting out loud every number). Then go back to the right hand and shake it 4 times, repeating the pattern (left arm, right foot, left foot) shaking each limb 4 times. Then shake each limb 2 times (again in the same pattern), and finally one shake of each limb, finishing with a call of "Hey!" or other similar expression (such as "Funky Chicken", or the name of your choir!)*

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. In recent years there has been written evidence to show that Brain Gym has no scientific grounds for claiming these benefits actually do occur, though most people agree that the exercises do appear to have a positive effect on the speed of learning, and increase confidence and aptitude for more complicated tasks (such as sight-reading, or singing songs that involve complicated words/rhythm patterns)

***Exercise:** Pat your head (up and down) and rub your tummy (in circles) 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!)*

Posture is the first physiological part of the singing voice to prepare, as this will affect both the breathing and the quality of sound production. The aim is to continue to free tension from the body (in particular the neck, jaw, shoulders and arms) and then to find a posture that allows for expansive breathing across the chest and lower parts of the ribs, and clear airways for breathing freely. The principal characteristics of a good posture are; a straightened spine, raised ribcage, relaxed shoulders, unlocked knees and a long neck.

***Exercise:** Stand 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!*

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 that 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 bowel (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: *Pant 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. A good way to test this is to place your fingers of both hands (so they meet at the finger tips) on the middle of your back, then blow out all of the air inside you and rest your thumbs (pointing forward) on your sides just below the ribcage. Now, as you fill up with air, see how far you can push your finger-tips apart using your breathing. As you hiss the air back out again, see how long you can keep your finger-tips apart. 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, 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 changes 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 producing 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:** Make a descending “Ooo” sound, like a firework, beginning as high in pitch as is comfortable. Then use consonants to launch the “Ooo” sound into the air, such as “Eey-Ooo” or “Ng-Ooo”. Also, aim 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 span 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 (though there are several more), and the set will usually sound different depending on where you come from, or what language you speak. In singing these typically are: A (Ah), E (Eh), I (i), O (ó) and U (oo). They are each created by 5 separate positions of the mouth, tongue and

larynx. Vowels are important because if they are not unified amongst the singers in a choir then the choir will not blend to make a clear sound.

If you are relaxed around your tongue, neck and face you should be able to feel your 5 vowels vibrating. One school of thought suggests the following approach to vowel production will help to achieve the most effective vowel sounds:

- “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

***Exercise:** Most scale exercises for singers use vowels (for instance, singing down a major scale to “Ooo” or “Ah” is very common place). Find a comfortable note in your range and then sing each of the vowels in turn, preceded by a “Ng” sound, releasing the vowel with a hard ‘G’ (ie. Ng-Gee, Ng-Geh, Ng-Gah, etc.) This exercise has the added benefit of beginning with a resonating sound, as well as holding back the air in the lungs from flowing out too quickly. This helps to focus the position of the resonance in the voice before the full vowel sound is released, and helps to keep the sound strong by encouraging support.*

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. They can also be used to promote leadership skills amongst the singers, by inviting individuals to lead the song.

- 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.
- Harmonic progressions – There are a variety of exercises for training intonation and tuning 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.
- 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 Kodaly 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 (eg. 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, if you are working with young people you could make sure that any content of text in your warm-up is not only suitable but entertaining, you could use the warm-up to introduce complicated cross-rhythms of a piece you are planning to rehearse), and are different from one rehearsal to the next.

Once you have grasped the basic needs of the warm-up you can experiment with developing your own exercises, and your own style of delivery. Write these down as you prepare them from week to week as, through your own practice and regular self-evaluation, you will soon find what works best to achieve the results you want from your choir.